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# **Christian Theology**

## **Emerging from the Akan Single-Tiered Unitive Perspective on Reality**

Trevor H. G. Smith

OCMS, PhD

### **ABSTRACT**

My thesis proposes using the Akan single-tiered unitive perspective on reality in two ways: first, as a hermeneutical tool for reading and understanding African Christian theologies,\* and second, as a means for opening up space in global conversations between African and western theologians on the relationship between the seen and unseen, the material and spiritual, and on the perceived fact-faith divide in the contemporary West. I have developed the term ‘single-tiered unitive perspective on reality’ to designate the idea, present in the literature under various other names, that the material and spiritual exist inseparably in an overlapping, permeable way that creates an interpretive landscape for the reading and writing of African Christian theologies.

In considering the interpretive landscape which emerges from this single-tiered unitive perspective on reality, two terms become especially useful. The first is Andrew Walls’ ‘maps of the universe’, and the second is Kwesi Dickson’s ‘religio-culture’. Within the context of the single-tiered unitive perspective, these conceptual frames of reference provide us with secondary interpretive tools for analysing the work of the mostly Akan scholars and ideas discussed in this thesis, —particularly Kwame Bediako and his three-pronged use of identity as a new theological category. The single-tiered unitive perspective also provides the interpretive landscape—and various categories that are important in the make-up of that landscape – for what I am calling ‘analogical continuity’, which takes advantage of particular analogical ‘landing places’, or ‘bridges’ between the primal Akan and biblical ‘maps’ or conceptions of reality. I suggest that ‘analogical continuity’ offers a new way through the continuity-discontinuity debate by locating continuity at the level of the single-tiered perspective. Finally, use of the single-tiered unitive perspective sheds light on the contribution Akan theologians are making to the global theological conversation in two important areas: Christology and biblical anthropology. In these two areas I bring various Akan scholars into conversation with each other, using the interpretive lens of the single-tiered perspective to demonstrate where and why they differ even as they work from a common interpretive perspective on reality.

\*I use ‘African’ to refer to sub-Saharan Africa, with particular attention to Ghana.



# **Christian Theology**

## **Emerging from the Akan Single-Tiered Unitive Perspective on Reality**

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the University of Middlesex

Dedication

To my parents, the Reverend Dr. W. Graham and Margaret G. Smith  
and  
to my wife, Joan S. Smith

November 2017

Oxford Centre for Mission Studies



## DECLARATION

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Signed  (Candidate)

Date March 12, 2018

## STATEMENT ONE

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Where correction services have been used, the extent and nature of the correction is clearly marked in a footnote.

Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

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This particular journey began seven years ago when I shared with a friend that I was ready to pursue a Doctor of Ministry degree. His comment, which has proved to be entirely false, was that for not much more work I could get a PhD. Having never pursued the former degree I can't say how much more work the PhD has been. But I can say that these past seven years have been among the most enjoyable of my academic life. So, to Dr. Rollin Grams I say, thank you for getting me started!

I must also express my deep appreciation to Dr. J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, my Director of Studies for his encouragement which began by taking on an American who knew very little about the topic I presented to him. I am particularly in his debt for hosting my visit to Ghana and arranging interviews for me with Dr. John Pobee, Dr. Mary Bediako, Dr. Benhardt Quarshie, and Mercy Amba Oduyoye. Dr. Diane Stinton, my secondary supervisor, has proved a patient and careful reader of my work and along with Professor Asamoah-Gyadu offered invaluable critiques and advice for moving my research forward.

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My hope and prayer is that this work will promote and build up God's Kingdom; for to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit alone belongs all the honor and glory now and forever. Amen.



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## Chapter One

### Introduction

#### 1. BACKGROUND OF THIS STUDY

A very pleasant slumber is sometimes disturbed by just a few words. As a person born, raised, and educated in the West and a Christian whose spiritual roots run parallel with those of the colonial missionaries,<sup>1</sup> it was Andrew Walls who woke me up. He did not mince words: ‘*Theology in the Third World is now the only theology worth caring about.*’ While he confessed immediately that ‘this is an exaggeration’, he stood by the broader point that ‘theology that matters will be theology where the Christians are’.<sup>2</sup> Walls continued in this same vein twenty years later when he wrote, ‘At a time when Christianity is itself increasingly marginal to Western intellectual discourse, that discourse needs to come to terms with Christianity as a non-Western religion.’<sup>3</sup> Walls’s student, Kwame Bediako, used this phrase in the title of his book, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*.<sup>4</sup> I realized then that I knew little, if anything, about this theology Walls said was going to change the global understanding of Christianity. And so I began to read.

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<sup>1</sup> I will be using the terms ‘West’ and ‘western’ to refer to the dominant understanding of reality that has grown out of post-Enlightenment thinking, which emphasizes the ability of reason to determine what is true and real. This belief is, of course, evident in what is often referred to as ‘modernity’. Post-modernity suggests the impossibility of any one metanarrative having the ability to explain all of reality, yet in my opinion it stumbles by asserting its own metanarrative as universally true. At the same time, however, post-modernity has opened the door to the serious consideration of alternative understandings of reality—even if it has difficulty accepting that one of those alternatives may in fact be universally true.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew F. Walls, ‘Towards Understanding Africa’s Place in Christian History’, in *Religion in a Pluralistic Society*, ed. John S. Pobee (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 182–83; italics in the original.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in The Transmission of the Faith* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), xix.

<sup>4</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995).

At about this same time I was deeply engaged in reading the works of Lesslie Newbigin. Newbigin wrote extensively about the fact-faith divide he found in England (and by extension the whole western post-Enlightenment tradition), which he had not encountered in his years as a missionary and church leader in India. In *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*,<sup>5</sup> Newbigin argues that the Christian worldview, which once held powerful sway in the West, was overturned not just by the rise of modern science. Rather, it was undermined from the start by Greco-Roman rationalism, which he read as asserting that human reason alone is able to discern truth. It should be noted, however, that some scholars argue—persuasively, in my opinion—that the situation is more nuanced than Newbigin suggests. D. C. Schindler argues that biblical knowing and the ancient pagan philosophical view have more in common with each other than either has with Enlightenment epistemology or with a Christianity which takes its methodology from modernity.<sup>6</sup> Because the ancients allowed room for ‘wonder’, the Greek philosophers did not treat *mythos* and *logos* as a radical either/or dichotomy as the Enlightenment did. Consequently, we do better to understand that Newbigin is really critiquing the post-Enlightenment rationalist view that if something is true then it is accessible to thinking people through the power of reason alone.

Christian apologists reacted to the Enlightenment by trying to show the ‘reasonableness’ of Christian belief. Increasingly, however, they were forced to retreat, because they never questioned the rationalistic assumptions of the rules dominating the post-Enlightenment intellectual world. As a practicing pastor, I am keenly aware of the problem posed to the church by this divide. Perhaps for this reason, one of the first

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<sup>5</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 1–13.

<sup>6</sup> See D. C. Schindler, ‘Mystery and Mastery: Philosophical Reflections on Biblical Epistemology’, in *The Bible and Epistemology*, ed. Mary Healy and Robin Parry (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2007), 181–98.

things I noticed as I began reading African Christian theologians was the absence of this divide. The western tendency to significantly privilege the material over the spiritual simply did not appear in the African theology I read. Virtually every African author, whether a professional theologian, historian, philosopher, or social scientist, made note of one particular phenomenon: a ‘unitive perspective’ that does not separate the visible from the invisible or the spiritual from the material, but holds them together such that any explanation of life in this world requires both spiritual and material cause and effect.<sup>7</sup>

The phrase ‘unitive perspective’ serves my purpose in this dissertation by highlighting how Africans perceive the world as a single reality rather than a bifurcated one. The first word, ‘unitive’, carries the connotation of producing a coherent whole. The second word, ‘perspective’, draws our attention to an interpretive landscape bounded on every side by horizons which include both the natural and supernatural in a unitive whole. Further, when Kwame Bediako referred to the West’s division of the world into two tiers,<sup>8</sup> the secular and the sacred, the term ‘single-tiered’ suggested itself as a way of differentiating his approach to reality (shared with a number of his Akan colleagues) from the approach common in the West. A ‘single-tiered’ perspective

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<sup>7</sup> We see this starting as far back as Carl Christian Reindorf, a native Ghanaian whose historical study of the Gold Coast was translated and published in English in 1895 (see Reindorf, *History of the Gold Coast and Asante: Based on Traditions and Historical Facts, Comprising a Period of More than Three Centuries from about 1500 to 1860*, 2nd ed. [Basel: Basel Mission, 1889].) Kwame Bediako put Reindorf’s work ‘in the same category as Bede’s and Gregory’s histories—essentially national histories with, and arising from, Christian interest’ (Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 4). In a very helpful introduction to Reindorf’s life and work, Heinz Hauser-Renner notes that Reindorf’s *History* embraces ‘the idea of society comprising ancestors, living beings, and the yet unborn; a strong reverence for the past; and the hand of the ancestors at work in both the present and the future’. Heinz Hauser-Renner, “‘Obstinate’ Pastor and Pioneer Historian: The Impact of Basel Mission Ideology on the Thought of Carl Christian Reindorf”, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 33, no. 2 (April 2009): 68–69. No western theologian I am aware of would, or possibly could, write of society existing in this way.

<sup>8</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 176.



rejects the privileging of the secular over the sacred, treating them as equals while recognizing that they are not the same.

This dissertation, then, combines two essentially African terms—in the sense that neither has any prior reliance on western thought—into a single phrase. I use this term, ‘single-tiered unitive perspective’, to describe what is natural to Bediako and the other scholars discussed in this dissertation, an approach to understanding the world that sees spiritual and material cause and effect as equally necessary to an understanding of life. I argue that for these Akan scholars, reality cannot be divided into material and spiritual, natural and supernatural. I do not suggest collapsing the material and spiritual into one another, but rather perceiving them as at once distinguishable but not separable.

Africans, as Bediako notes, experience life and reality as a single, unitive whole—this is what is natural to them. It is because of this distinguishable but inseparable quality of the spiritual and material that key doctrines like the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the hypostatic union of Christ’s two natures are readily grasped by many African theologians.

In short, the phrase ‘single-tiered unitive perspective’ provides a hermeneutical tool that I suggest is essential for properly understanding and appreciating the contribution of the Akan scholars I analyse in this dissertation. These African scholars perceive their world as a robust, permeable material/spiritual reality. I believe Benezet Bujo captures something of the essence of this single-tiered unitive perspective when he writes, ‘All the elements in the universe are related to each other in an interlocking way. One cannot touch one of them without causing the whole to vibrate.’<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Benezet Bujo, ‘Distinctives of African Ethics’, in *African Theology on the Way: Current Conversations*, ed. Diane B. Stinton (London: SPCK, 2010), 81. The full quote is: ‘In African religion and ethics, everything in the world is intimately connected. All the elements in the universe are related to each other in an interlocking way. One cannot touch one of them without causing the whole to vibrate. Humans are not the only part of the cosmos; they are also a microcosm within the macrocosm, or a miniature version

In spite of the near ubiquity of this approach to reality in one article and book after another, as I began my studies I could find no one writing specifically on the effect this ‘unitive perspective’ was having on the formulation of Christian theology in Africa. At best, scholars noted the void. For example, Kwesi Dickson, while using the term ‘religio-culture’ to make clear that religion is not a sub-set of culture, argues that the colonial missionaries failed to take this underlying unitive perspective into account, with serious consequences for the church in Africa. Dickson notes that while ‘it has been commented often enough that in traditional Africa, religion informs life in general ... seldom has the bearing of this upon African response to Christian missions been given any detailed consideration’. Consequently, ‘a potentially interesting and valuable aspect of Church history and theology has yet to be written’.<sup>10</sup> Ogbu Kalu, in his work on African Pentecostalism, notes that in Africa ‘all the realms of life are sacralised; there is no distinction between the sacred and the profane’. He then goes on to say that while ‘the eco-theology in this religious landscape is very important’, he was unable to pursue its implications further at that time.<sup>11</sup> That two of Africa’s best theological thinkers would comment on this need for further analysis established the importance and rationale for this dissertation in my mind.

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of the universe. Black Africans belong at the same time to the world of the living, the dead, and the yet-to-be-born, and they can identify with spirits, animals, plants and minerals. They know that they exist within the vital flux of all creation, which ultimately connects them to the Supreme Being, God, the source of all life.’

<sup>10</sup> Kwesi A. Dickson, *Theology In Africa* (New York: Orbis, 1984), 92–93.

<sup>11</sup> Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 176. Kalu goes on to describe this eco-theology in the following passage: ‘This is a charismatic worldview. ... It is an organic worldview in which the three dimensions of space are bound together, and the visible and the invisible worlds interweave. Nothing happens in the visible world that has not been predetermined in the invisible realm’ (178).

## 2. RESEARCH QUESTION

My research emerged, then, from observing what I call the single-tiered unitive perspective on reality in the work of Akan Christian scholars. This perspective produces a distinct interpretive landscape that holds together the natural and the supernatural, the material and the spiritual, so that any explanation of life must take both into full account. Following this observation, I look at how this unitive perspective is used in the writings of selected Akan Christian theologians. Further, I ask how the unitive perspective itself becomes an interpretive key for understanding the work of these Akan scholars. Finally, I ask how this Akan unitive perspective might offer a tool for better understanding—if not contribute to resolving—the theological fact-faith divide that was discussed in Newbigin's work and remains evident in the West.

## 3. METHODOLOGY—A THEOLOGICAL OBSERVER OF THE TACIT

Andrew Kirk has suggested that westerners reading and analysing African theologians, use a methodology he calls 'observing the tacit'.<sup>12</sup> This is precisely the methodology I

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<sup>12</sup> Richard Haney told me about this remark, which occurred during a conversation with Andrew Kirk, who was serving as Haney's supervisor in his doctoral work at the time. In a personal correspondence (received December 22, 2016), Haney recalled the conversation as follows: 'My recollection of Andrew's comment ... is as follows. In a post seminar discussion with him ... he said in a musing kind of way that a missionary could be seen as a tacit observer. He was grasping the tacit idea [of Michael Polanyi] and playing with it. ... The outsider-missionary comes into a new setting and notices what the indigenous folk register as tacit or hidden. That is, the outsider comes, enters a new cultural setting with alertness and notices details, practices, verbal expressions that the locals take for granted.' In his dissertation ('Mapping Mission as Translation with Reference to Michael Polanyi's Heuristic Philosophy' [PhD diss., Middlesex University, 2014], <http://eprints.mdx.ac.uk>), Haney writes, 'Applying the Polanyian notion of the tacit dimension to missional translation features three dimensions. The first dimension recognises the missionary as originally located outside of a receptor culture and possessing the advantage of seeing cultural particulars in a fresh way as an outsider peering inside. The second and third dimensions refer to the missionary's work of perceiving and then integrating. The three dimensions for the missionary are as follows: 1. Functions as a tacit observer (understanding) 2. Pays attention to tacit particulars and perceives them as clues for translation (communicating and evaluating) 3. Assembles particulars into focal patterns, working to achieve integration (communicating and evaluating)' (p. 187–88). Haney also references several scholars who point to this same idea of tacit knowledge using other terminology. John Searle uses the term 'background', a usage picked up by Charles Taylor, who uses the same term to describe knowledge that lingers in the background and helps make what is happening in front of us intelligible. See John Searle, *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge

have sought to use in this work. Observing the tacit involves, of course, a very close reading of the texts, but a reading that is filtered through my own tacit assumptions such that the differences between my western worldview and the worldview of the Akan theologians I am reading jumps off the page. As Opoku Onyinah has demonstrated, the first missionaries to arrive in Ghana carried with them a belief in the supernatural weakened by the tacit assumptions of the Enlightenment.<sup>13</sup> Since I grew up with the same biblical understanding as the missionaries Onyinah describes, the robust both/and—natural and supernatural, material and spiritual—approach of the African theologians I read caught my attention; it was not what I expected. Once fully grasped, however, the single-tiered unitive perspective and the interpretive landscape it describes assumed great explanatory power for me. As a non-African, my point of view allows me to observe and analyse the sometimes tacit presence and effects of the unitive perspective in the writing of African Christian theologies.

A second methodological point has to do with epistemology. What follows is a work of theology. Accordingly, while I have certainly benefited from reading in the social sciences and will use social scientific findings in a number of places, I agree with A. O. Balcomb's suggestion that there is a danger in failing to recognize the deeply anti-theological bias and 'hermeneutic of doubt' typical of the social sciences. Balcomb argues that the Augustinian project of 'faith seeking understanding' is barely possible in the West today due to the pervasive western commitment to the post-Enlightenment principles of incredulity, disenchantment, and ethics disconnected from both God and community. In other words, after the Enlightenment, even theology could no longer

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University Press, 1983), 140–55; Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 68f.

<sup>13</sup> Opoku Onyinah, 'Akan Witchcraft and the Concept of Exorcism in the Church of Pentecost' (PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 2002), 133, <http://etheses.bham.ac.uk/1694/1/Onyinah02PhD.pdf>.

assume God existed. According to Balcomb, ‘incredulity, the penchant not to believe easily, would guarantee a methodology that was critical; disenchantment, the ridding of the universe of all subjectivity, would guarantee an epistemology that was rational, and ethical commitment would guarantee an outcome that was just’.<sup>14</sup>

Balcomb also points out that African students studying theology in western universities, or African universities using the western model, were ‘surprised’ by the ‘profound hermeneutic of doubt’ they encountered where ‘all the theological disciplines come with a heavy dose of the social sciences’. He goes on, ‘the end result is a huge disjunction between their faith and their theological education and they probably go back to their places of ministry (if they do go back) with a degree that would put them in high esteem amongst their people, but with no tools to meet their needs and increased suspicion of the “godless” West’.<sup>15</sup> Balcomb then references John Mbiti’s famous parable, told by John Mbiti in *Third World Theologies*, about the young African scholar who returned home with his PhD to the acclaim of his village but was unable to meet his own sister’s need for immediate help, despite all his (western) training.<sup>16</sup> Balcomb’s point is not to disparage the social sciences so much as to argue that the Enlightenment paradigm—which so privileges autonomous human reason, a dis-enchanted world, and an ethic of equality and justice with no roots in either God or the community—is the wrong paradigm for studying how theology is done in Africa today. In this regard, using

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<sup>14</sup> A. O. Balcomb, ‘Shifting the Theological Paradigm in Africa: Building on the Legacy of Kwame Bediako’, in *Seeing New Facets of the Diamond—Christianity as a Universal Faith: Essays in Honour of Kwame Bediako*, ed. Gillian Mary Bediako, Benhardt Y. Quarshie, and J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, (Akropong-Akuapem, Ghana: Regnum Africa, 2014), 73.

<sup>15</sup> Balcomb, ‘Shifting the Theological Paradigm’, 76.

<sup>16</sup> For the full parable, see John Mbiti, ‘Theological Impotence and the Universality of the Church’, in *Mission Trends, No. 3: Third World Theologies*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (New York: Paulist, 1976), 6–8. Balcomb may also have used the case of Emmanuel Martey, who within two years of receiving his doctorate at New York City’s Union Seminary under the supervision of James Cone, returned to Ghana and essentially rejected liberation theology while becoming an outspoken leader of a fully Trinitarian understanding of the gospel that included an embrace of the active participation of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church through healing and prophecy.

the single-tiered unitive perspective as an interpretive lens allows me to employ insights from the social sciences without assuming the anti-theological bias Balcomb describes.

This recognition in no way undermines the importance of the contributions made by social science to the study of Africa's religio-culture. It does, however, highlight the point that the 'field of play' for a study such as this one is largely determined by the scholarly standards of the discipline adopted by the researcher. No particular field is neutral—each is tilted toward the assumptions of the discipline on which it is based.<sup>17</sup> For my own research, I have attempted a both/and approach, trying to learn from the contributions of other disciplines but in the end writing from within my own discipline of theology, where faith in *Yahweh*, the Supreme God of Scripture, seeks understanding.<sup>18</sup>

Ogbu Kalu also reminds us that methodologies provide the framework for asking questions.<sup>19</sup> They tell us why certain questions are asked rather than others, as well as how those questions can be answered. As an observer of the tacit, that is, one who observes the Akan religio-culture from the vantage point of my own (religio-) culture, and a theologian committed to faith seeking understanding, my questions aim to uncover how the Akan single-tiered unitive perspective affects the writing of theology. When we look in Chapter Three at Kwame Bediako's use of 'identity' as a new methodology, we see that he uses categories from the religio-culture emerging from the

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<sup>17</sup> See here three articles in Jacob K. Olupona, ed., *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society* (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 1991): Jacob K. Olupona, 'Major Issues in the Study of African Traditional Religion', 25–33; David Westerlund, "'Insiders" and "Outsiders" in the Study of African Religions: Notes on Some Problems of Theory and Method', 15–24; and Bennetta W. Jules-Rosette, 'Tradition and Continuity in African Religions: The Case of New Religious Movements', 149–65.

<sup>18</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, relying on the work of Michael Polanyi, helpfully suggests that all truth claims ultimately rest on a faith claim that cannot be proved. Hence we await the eschaton for ultimate verification.

<sup>19</sup> Kalu writes, 'On the theological level, methodology is the essence of all theologies. The questions asked and how they are answered determine the message and its impact.' O. U. Kalu, 'Daughters of Ethiopia: Constructing a Feminist Discourse in Ebony Strokes', in *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*, Isabel Phiri, et al., (New York: Orbis, 2006), 265.

Akan single-tiered unitive perspective to write his theology. This in turn opens up the possibility for what I am calling ‘analogical continuity’, as new categories emerge and connect the Akan primal universe with the world of the Bible. In Chapter Five, I show how Bediako and other Akan theologians use the category of ancestor, which emerges from the single-tiered world of the seen and unseen and is integral to the Akan identity, to work out their Christology. I use a similar approach in Chapter Six to connect the Akan and biblical worlds while addressing the question of what it means to be fully human.

A final methodological point is that I have focused my research primarily on Ghanaian theologians. A word of explanation is in order. My interest in Ghana started with Kwame Bediako, who for me became something like a door into an exciting new reading room filled with extraordinary theological works. I have already mentioned the work of Carl Christian Reindorf. After Reindorf came a group of Ghana’s first generation of trained scholars, people like Christian G. Baeta, K. A. Busia, J. B. Danquah, Kwesi Dickson, and the Report of the 1955 Gold Coast Conference (particularly the work of E. A. Asamoah, Baeta, and Busia). Numerous Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, and Protestant scholars began their work in the following years. As my research continued, however, four Akan scholars became my primary sources: Kwesi Dickson, John Pobee, Kwame Bediako, and Mercy Amba Oduyoye. These four Ghanaian scholars gave me more than enough primary source material to examine closely the presence and effect of the unitive perspective on the writing of African Christian theologies. I have, of course, augmented my study of their work with that of a number of other scholars. Peter Sarpong, Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, Kwame Gyekye, Emmanuel K. Larbi, Frank Kwesi Adams, Pashington Obeng, Opoku Onyinah, Clifton Clark, and Charles Aye-Addo became, to differing degrees, helpful guides. Further, since any attempt to try to cover all of sub-Saharan Africa would be an impossibility,

the richness of the Ghanaian sources made focusing on theologians from among the Akan of Ghana a fairly easy decision.<sup>20</sup> In other words, it is not simply the quantity but also the quality of Ghanaian scholarship that is so impressive.

Finally, having read extensively from the work of these Ghanaian scholars, I travelled to Ghana in February of 2017. I had the opportunity to share my research with MPhil and PhD students in two seminars at Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon, Accra, Ghana. During my time in Accra I had the great privilege of interviewing both Mercy Amba Oduyoye and John Pobee. Mercy Oduyoye helped deepen my understanding of her relationship with western feminist thinkers, while John Pobee gave me a greater understanding and appreciation of his thinking compared to Kwame Bediako's. Finally, I visited the Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission, and Culture, where I met and spoke with both Mary Bediako and Benhardt Quarshie. Engaging with these individuals and with the institution that Kwame Bediako helped found were invaluable experiences. Reading is one way of learning, seeing is another; examining my ideas in conversation with these key thinkers—especially near the end of my project—both confirmed and sharpened my analyses.<sup>21</sup> It is also worth noting that I was privileged to have the opportunity to worship at the International Central Gospel Church and hear the preaching of Dr. Mensa Otabil in person.

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<sup>20</sup> Pashington Obeng provides the following brief description of the Akan: 'The Akan groups, who form two-thirds of the population of Ghana, occupy the greater part of the southern Ghana in the semi-deciduous forest areas. The majority of the Akan live in Ghana while others are found in the Ivory Coast. The Akan of Ghana include the Asante, Fante, Brong, Akyem, Akwapim, Akwamu, Kwahu, Aowin, Wassa, Assin, Denkyira, Sewhwi, and Adansi. Among these are found some linguistic and cultural similarities. The Akan languages are a subgroup of the Kwa languages found to the south of the Volta Lake in Ghana and also spoken by other peoples of West Africa. The Akan tend to follow a matrilineal line of succession whereby brothers and nephews on the mother's side, and not sons, inherit property. Further, systems of marriage and naming of children tend to be similar among the Akan-speaking peoples.' Pashington Obeng, *Asante Catholicism, Religious and Cultural Reproduction Among the Akan of Ghana* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 1–2.

<sup>21</sup> I am indebted to Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu for hosting me on my trip.



#### 4. TWO KEY TERMS: MAPS OF THE UNIVERSE AND RELIGIO-CULTURE

I have found two concepts appearing in the literature to be particularly useful in my analysis of how the single-tiered unitive perspective functions as a hermeneutical key for reading and understanding Akan Christian theology. The first is Andrew Walls's concept of 'maps of the universe'; the second is Kwesi Dickson's understanding of 'religio-culture'. The image of 'maps of the universe' gives us a way to conceptualize how the various cosmologies emerging from the single-tiered unitive construct are organized, develop, and change within relatively fixed parameters. The maps describe the various elements, material and spiritual, which form and populate the interpretive landscape emerging from the unitive perspective. 'Religio-culture', besides pointing to the impossibility of analysing African life without acknowledging that the divine elements are inextricably included in everything 'culture' refers to, also describes the Akan response to the interpretive landscape with its unitive material-spiritual horizons.<sup>22</sup> In other words, both terms tacitly rely upon and make use of the perceived single-tiered unitive perspective on reality that is characteristic of the Akan context.

##### 4.1 Maps of the Universe

I first encountered the phrase 'maps of the universe' in the work of Andrew Walls,<sup>23</sup> but a number of other scholars also use it.<sup>24</sup> Walls wanted to correct the error of western

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<sup>22</sup> I am drawing upon John V. Taylor's phrase, 'traditions of response', which he discusses in Chapter Nine of *The Go-Between God* (London: SCM Press, 1972). In an amazingly optimistic passage, he suggests that one day, 'As the Holy Spirit turns Muslim or Hindu or Marxist eyes towards the living Christ, the half-truths in their traditions of response will be completed, error will be shown up, disobedience condemned, all evasion of God brought to a halt, and his Son crucified afresh. And out of all that a new Jesus-centred Hinduism, a new Messiah-centred Islam, a new Christ-directed Communism, will be raised up' (p. 192).

<sup>23</sup> See Andrew F. Walls, 'Introduction: African Christianity in the History of Religions', in *Christianity in Africa in the 1990s*, ed. Christopher Fyfe and Andrew F. Walls (Edinburgh: Centre of African Studies, 1996), 1–16; Andrew F. Walls, 'Africa and the Future of Christianity: A Summary and Reflection', in Fyfe and Walls, 139–48. See also Andrew F. Walls, 'Editorial: Thoughts on the Background to the Project', *Journal of African Christian Thought* 11, no. 2 (December 2008): 1–3.

missionaries who saw any inclusion of the African cosmology in the church's theology as a pre-Christian holdover. In defining what he means by maps of the universe, Walls writes that any particular map

will show the place of other peoples in the world, in relation to family, kin and nation. It will show how we perceive society and ranks, divisions and our own place in them. Our world-view map contains ideas about the empirical world and the world beyond, about past, present and future, ideas of right and wrong, ideas of what is safe and what is dangerous, rights and duties, sources of protection and power.<sup>25</sup>

Walls states that people operate with several maps at the same time. Large-scale maps would include theology, while other, smaller scale 'world-view' maps would cover everyday life. Elements from one map would engage the other as needed, but always in a coherent way.

Walls notes that while Africa's 'maps'<sup>26</sup> have been influenced by changes taking place there, especially the advent of Christianity, their component parts have remained. This is true even if the relationships between the components have changed—and, in some instances, changed radically. He further argues that for Christianity to take root in Africa, it must explain the gospel using the component parts of Africa's maps.

Extending the metaphor, Christianity will need to show how the gospel provides 'roads'

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<sup>24</sup> See Ogbu U. Kalu's *African Pentecostalism and Power, Poverty and Prayer* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2000). Lamin Sanneh also made reference to this concept in a 1996 article in 'Global Christianity and the Re-education of the West', *The Christian Century* (July 19–16, 1995): 715–18. More recently, Afeosemime Adogame has picked up this phrase. See Afe Adogame, 'Calling a Trickster Deity a "Bad" Name in Order to Hang It? Deconstructing Indigenous African Epistemologies within Global Religious Maps of the Universe,' in *The Changing World Religion Map: Sacred Places, Identities, Practices and Politics*, ed. S. D. Brunn (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2015), 1813–26; Afeosemime Adogame, 'Mapping African Christianities within Religious Maps of the Universe', *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 33 n.s. (2016), accessed March 20, 2017, <http://psb2016.ptsem.edu/mapping-african-christianities-within-religious-maps-of-the-universe/>. This was Dr. Adogame's inaugural lecture, delivered at the occasion of his appointment as the Maxwell M. Upson Professor of Christianity and Society at Princeton Seminary on April 28, 2016.

<sup>25</sup> Walls, 'Editorial', 2.

<sup>26</sup> Walls is careful to speak in the plural because not every element was present within each traditional culture: the Central Luo, for example, did not have a 'niche' for God, while the Gikuyu had no place for ancestors.

to the places of protection and access to power for which Africa's traditional religions were developed.<sup>27</sup> Walls writes,

in order to have effect in Africa, the Christian tradition has thus had to be applied to these pre-existing components; it has been placed on the available maps of the universe, and interpreted within existing categories. Christianity has thus necessarily inherited all the old goals of religion; in particular, the association with protection and with power is undiminished.<sup>28</sup>

Walls argues that 'considerable revision' took place as Christianity came to Africa, especially in Africa's understanding 'of the transcendent world'. At the same time, Walls insists that Africa's primal maps are now influencing the writing of African Christian theology, but always within the context of cohering maps.<sup>29</sup>

More specifically, Walls argues that the component parts of the African maps of the universe—'God, local divinities, ancestors, objects of power'—are so near to the biblical cosmology that they offer well-travelled paths for Africans coming to the Christian faith for the first time. For example, the Bible pictures a universe inhabited by *Yahweh*, angels, archangels, and the whole host of heavenly beings, as well as the company of heaven, comprised of those living who have died. In short, the map is familiar, though different in terms of how power is distributed. The relationships between its components have changed as a result of Christianity's coming, but—and this is key—the components themselves have remained. In other words, adherents to both traditional religions and Christianity continue to accept the veracity of the interpretive landscape that emerges from the single-tiered perspective, even as they meet modernity in its western iteration.

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<sup>27</sup> We remember that the Greek word for road is *hodos*, which is also translated 'way', as when the early believers were called 'people of the Way' and Jesus referred to himself as the 'way'.

<sup>28</sup> Walls, 'Introduction', 5.

<sup>29</sup> Chapters Five and Six will demonstrate how, in the area of Christology, the western understanding of Jesus' person and work is colored by the Akan category of ancestor, while Mercy Oduyoye uses the Akan categories of *ntoro* and *mogya* to color the biblical understanding of what it means to be fully human.

Walls then introduces the idea—subsequently picked up by other scholars—that Christians ‘colour in’ this map of the universe in particular ways. For example, while African churches may take for granted ‘the divinity element in the older cosmologies’, they add shades of colour representing aspects of divinity—God’s immanence and transcendence, his grace and truth—that were not present, or not clearly seen, in the older cosmologies. In other words, ‘they colour’ in the old maps ‘differently’.<sup>30</sup>

Critically, Walls (followed by both Ogbu Kalu and Kwame Bediako)<sup>31</sup> works on the assumption that Africa’s maps and the biblical map originate from the same fundamental understanding of reality emerging from the single-tiered unitive perspective. Or, as Walls writes, ‘They are the same maps, marking that busy, constantly crossed, frontier of the phenomenal and transcendent worlds.’<sup>32</sup> The result is an interpretive landscape within which Africans can articulate a coherent theology.

Walls articulates a difference between ‘post Enlightenment Western maps’ and African maps when he notes that western maps, ‘even when designed by Christian believers’, close the frontiers between the phenomenal and transcendent worlds—or at best restrict that frontier by establishing ‘defined, regulated crossing points’.<sup>33</sup> Walls points to the fact that African maps can incorporate both God’s sovereignty and the continued presence and activity of other spiritual powers to demonstrate that the same

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<sup>30</sup> Walls, ‘Introduction’, 8–9.

<sup>31</sup> Ogbu Kalu demonstrates the usefulness of maps of the universe that are ‘coloured’ differently when he quotes Andrew Walls to describe his own understanding, as an African scholar, of the difference between the Aladura and the Pentecostals. Walls points out that one of the issues that separated them was their understanding of ‘subordinate spiritual beings’. The Aladura saw them as sometimes good and sometimes demonic, while Pentecostals tended to classify them all as demonic. Kalu’s point, however, is that ‘both draw from the issues raised in primal religion’ and ‘*represent the continuity of the religious consciousness demonstrated in the divinity element in the older cosmologies ... They use the same maps of the universe—even if they color them differently*’. Walls, ‘African Christianity in the History of Religion’, 8–9; quoted in Ogbu U. Kalu, *Poverty and Prayer* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2000), 105.

<sup>32</sup> Walls, ‘Introduction’, 7–8.

<sup>33</sup> Walls, ‘Introduction’, 7–8.

essential map is present in the primal universe and the Bible. While western missionaries in some instances tried—never successfully—to simply do away with the deities African maps made it possible for African Christians to ‘reorder’ the deities as either demons or angels and put all under the authority of Jesus. Further, their experience of the superior power of the Holy Spirit meant that the biblical God was able to accomplish for them everything they had hoped for from the deities. Consequently, ‘the divinity component has been drawn inside the activity of the God-component, as regards both theory and practice’.<sup>34</sup> Walls uses the case of ancestors as a second illustration of how maps with the same components can be coloured differently by Protestant and Roman Catholic Christians. Protestants essentially did away with the ancestors because they no longer had a category large enough to hold them, while Roman Catholics re-coloured the ancestors as part of the company of saints.<sup>35</sup>

My analysis of the single-tiered unitive perspective, which is foundational to Africa’s maps of the universe, will identify significant landing places for Christian doctrines. I therefore employ Walls’s idea of maps of the universe throughout this work, and particularly in Chapter Four, where I explore the issue of continuity between Africa’s traditional religions and Christianity. There I will note that continuity does exist, but it is between the Akan primal universe and the biblical understanding of reality, both of which emerge from the single-tiered unitive perspective. While acknowledging the fact that Scripture was composed over a period of roughly a thousand years (depending on how one dates the various books), and evidences development, I argue that any development we see follows a trajectory in line with the single-tiered unitive perspective of the Garden of Eden story itself. Regardless of

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<sup>34</sup> Walls, ‘Introduction’, 8.

<sup>35</sup> Walls, ‘Introduction’, 8–9.

whether one reads that story as ‘myth’, Scripture draws on an understanding of reality which allows for the overlap and interaction of the ‘spiritual’ and the ‘material’, the natural and the supernatural. We see a similar understanding in accounts of Samuel coming from the land of the dead to speak with Saul, and of Jesus conversing with Moses and Elijah at the Transfiguration.

We see further evidence of the single-tiered unitive perspective in the matter of dreams and visions—what Gyekye calls ‘paranormal cognition’.<sup>36</sup> The biblical narrative contains numerous examples: God speaks to the prophet Ezekiel in a vision (Ez 1.1); Jeremiah laments that visions no longer come to God’s people (Lam 2.9); Daniel interprets the ‘dream and visions’ of Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 2, 4); Joseph receives angelic messages in his dreams regarding both the plan for Jesus’ birth and the need to flee to Egypt (Mt 1–2); Peter and Paul are led by dreams (Acts 10.9–20 and 16.6–10). Healings from disease by the immediate action of God also appear throughout Scripture, further indicating the overlap of the spiritual and material as God manifests his power. Here the idea of ‘colouring’ becomes crucial, as Scripture condemns all idolatry while insisting that special revelation is required to truly know *Yahweh*. At the same time, the experiences of practitioners of Africa’s traditional religions who come to Christian faith help qualify some interpretations of Old Testament pagan practices that, in the West, lack nuance or depth.

## 4.2 Religio-Culture

Like maps of the universe, ‘religio-culture’ is a concept that reminds us of both commonalities in the understandings of reality held by different African people groups and the biblical texts, both of which emerge from the single-tiered unitive perspective,

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<sup>36</sup> Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 6.

and the nuances and differences that occur as practitioners colour their maps differently. The concept of religio-culture foregrounds the structures that contribute to different understandings of reality—two-tiered in the West, unified for the Akan—and the difference this makes in the writing of theology.

Kwesi Dickson, an Akan Old Testament scholar, was the first to use this term ‘religio-culture’.<sup>37</sup> I find the term useful because it asserts that ‘culture’ is too small a word to describe the Akan context.<sup>38</sup> The term is also helpful in describing the Akan response to the interpretive landscape in which they live and move. In his discussion of ‘culture’ in *Theology in Africa*, Dickson uses Christopher Dawson’s term ‘theogamy, a coming together of the divine and the human within the limits of a sacred tradition’, to describe African life and thought. According to Dickson, ‘African culture and religion are bound up together, so much so that the term ... religion informs the African’s way of life in its totality.’<sup>39</sup>

In a chapter titled, ‘The African Religio-Cultural Reality’, Dickson argues that Africans have a reasonable way of looking at the world, in which there is no radical disconnect between the seen and unseen, the physical and the metaphysical. The world Dickson describes is one in which the seen and unseen constantly interact and permeate one another. In this world, nothing happens by mere chance: no event in life, regardless

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<sup>37</sup> Kwesi Dickson uses this term in the title of Chapter Two (‘The African Religio-Cultural Reality’) of *Theology in Africa*.

<sup>38</sup> As noted above, I limit myself here to sub-Saharan Africa as the locus of this study; I will further limit much of my work to the Akan of Ghana for reasons already articulated.

<sup>39</sup> Dickson, *Theology in Africa*, 29. While Dickson was the first to use this phrase, Busia and Mbiti use the idea, and Peter Sarpong and Mercy Oduyoye have picked up and use the phrase. Terence Ranger speaks of the ‘African idiom of the spiritual’ as he critically addresses the issue of language and thought forms apart from which culture cannot exist—making the point, without using the phrase, that African culture is always a religio-culture. Terence Ranger, ‘The Churches, the Nationalist State and African Religion’, in *Christianity in Independent Africa*, ed. Edward Fasholé-Luke, Richard Gray, Adrian Hastings, and Godwin Tasie (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 497. Andrew Walls speaks of the ‘mental and moral fabric of a society’ and ‘different worlds of discourse’ in pointing to this same on-the-ground religio-culture of Africa. Walls, *Missionary Movement*, 75.

of its mediate causes, lacks a final cause, because the world is undivided and whole.

Dickson is quite clear, for example, that while Africans readily acknowledge medical explanations for disease and death—for example, the connection between bacteria and some respiratory disorders—they believe such explanations are not the whole story. He writes,

The African predominantly interprets his world theologically, rather than in scientific terms, in terms of *final* rather than material causes. This is not to say, however, that the African has no knowledge of what might be labelled scientific causes. ... The world of natural phenomena may be viewed by the African as part of spiritual reality, but there is no question of one world being real and the other not.<sup>40</sup>

In other words, Africans naturally interpret life theologically, looking for ultimate explanations in the activity of ‘spirit powers’ who ‘for one reason or the other may act for or against man’.<sup>41</sup> Rather than falling into a fatalistic view of the world, however, Dickson insists that Africans have constructed a coherent view of reality that is robust and participatory, a ‘living universe’ in which people take an active part.<sup>42</sup> Further, Dickson believes that the strength of Akan religio-culture is such that Africa will produce both a Christian and African iteration of the gospel rooted precisely in this understanding of reality, despite the influence of the West. Indeed, Dickson suggests that ‘African wisdom’—another term he uses to describe this robust, holistic world of the seen and unseen—has the potential to produce a more stable and life-sustaining society for Africans and, through them, healthier societies in the world at large.<sup>43</sup>

In describing Akan religio-culture, Dickson also wrote about the important place of community for the Akan, noting that ‘it is a commonplace that the sense of

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<sup>40</sup> Dickson, *Theology in Africa*, 50–51.

<sup>41</sup> Dickson, *Theology in Africa*, 50.

<sup>42</sup> Dickson, *Theology in Africa*, 52.

<sup>43</sup> See Dickson, *Theology in Africa*, 85.



community is strong in Africa'. This experience of community emerges from the Akan's single-tiered unitive perspective and the landscape contained within the interpretive horizon it produces. Dickson continues, Akan society 'is in equilibrium when its customs are maintained, its goals attained and the spirit powers given regular and adequate recognition'.<sup>44</sup> In Chapter Five, for example, we will note the importance, of the ancestors for preserving the moral standards of the community as the living engage through ritual and intercession with the living dead.<sup>45</sup> Dickson identifies a clear difference between Africa and the West precisely at the point of the unitive perspective when he writes,

In the West it is customary to systematise and label, distinguishing the animate from the inanimate, the physical from the metaphysical, the sacred from the secular, the natural from the supernatural. To the African such distinctions are not as meaningful as one might expect, for the unseen powers are held to be active also in the natural order.<sup>46</sup>

Kwesi Dickson would agree with Alan Thomson, who has argued persuasively that Christian thinkers too quickly adopted the term 'culture' from its social science roots under the false assumption that the term is theologically neutral. Working from a careful analysis of Charles Taylor, John Milbank, and Jacques Derrida, Thomson concludes that this assumption of neutrality is highly suspect. Further, he notes that 'implied in these recent critiques is the possibility that definitions of culture participate in and embody dispositions potentially antithetical to the Christian framework'.<sup>47</sup> Thomson goes on to argue that the secularized definition of culture is restricted to the imminent and has no access to the transcendent. Though it offers one approach to the study of the

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<sup>44</sup> Dickson, *Theology in Africa*, 62.

<sup>45</sup> Dickson notes that one of the ways the community maintains its moral standards is through a well-developed system of taboos, especially in the area of sexuality, that emerge out of the religio side of religio-culture as ancestors exercise their influence. See Dickson, *Theology in Africa*, 65–67.

<sup>46</sup> Dickson, *Theology in Africa*, 49.

<sup>47</sup> Alan Thomson, *Culture in a Post-Secular Context* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2014), vii.

world, it cannot be considered as *the* objective approach. Such a claim, he writes, could only be ‘based in an exercise of sheer preference since it springs from only one *possible* objective basis for reality (and is therefore not simply *the* objective basis). ... The claim to neutrality is therefore revealed as a biased rather than objective claim.’<sup>48</sup>

Thomson’s research, in which he places John Milbank, Karl Barth, and Kwame Bediako in conversation with secular assumptions, corroborates Kwesi Dickson’s insight that Akan culture is ‘religio-culture’ because it fundamentally embraces the interaction between the transcendent and immanent in the life of the Akan—a tendency that I am calling the single-tiered unitive perspective.

The import of Dickson’s insight is that referring to Akan ‘culture’ is problematic and very possibly misleading unless it is immediately followed by some sort of explanation of the *religio* element that is always operative. The use of the single-tiered unitive perspective as an interpretive lens takes into account Dickson’s insight that the *religio* element is inextricably connected to every part of Akan culture. It is consequently a sharper analytical tool with which to understand Akan theology. It also accords with Ogbu Kalu’s reminder that the gospel must be able to answer the questions arising from the ‘interior’ of a people’s culture—or in the case of the Akan, religio-culture—if it is to speak to the whole African person.<sup>49</sup>

## **5. THE UNEXPECTED PERSISTENCE OF THE SINGLE-TIERED UNITIVE PERSPECTIVE**

One of the great surprises within the scholarly world, particularly among social scientists, is that neither increased access to educational opportunities nor urbanization has changed the basic single-tiered unitive landscape of the world for Africans. From

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<sup>48</sup> Thomson, *Culture in a Post-Secular Context*, 3.

<sup>49</sup> Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*, 16, 26.

their vantage point, the West's two-tiered understanding of reality appears flat and oddly two-dimensional when compared to their own interpretive landscape. Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar describe this surprising reality, noting that there is

widespread evidence that many Africans today continue to hold beliefs derived from traditional cosmologies which they apply to their everyday activities, even when they live in cities and derive their living from jobs in the civil service or the modern economic sector. Contrary to what an older generation of Western scholars was inclined to believe, such views have hardly diminished with education. Religious belief operates at every level of society in Africa.<sup>50</sup>

Rosalind Hackett, working from the vantage point of the social sciences and in line with Terrence Ranger's work on the non-static nature of Africa's traditional religions, argues for a process she calls 'revitalization', in which 'traditional religious beliefs and practices have found new forms of expression and new avenues of survival in the modern world' allowing them to remain 'a cultural, political, economic, and religious force'.<sup>51</sup> Perhaps even more significant is the work of Birgit Meyer, who argues that the western penchant for separating the religious from the secular results in a limited ability to fully appreciate the African context.<sup>52</sup> This is a key methodological critique because it suggests that western scholars, using their two-tiered approach, analyse what they 'see' without recognizing what they are not seeing—or believe not to exist—namely, the unseen supernatural.

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<sup>50</sup> Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar, 'Religion and Politics in Sub-Saharan Africa', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 36, no. 2 (1998): 177.

<sup>51</sup> Rosalind I. J. Hackett, 'Revitalization in African Tradition Religion', in Olupona, 135.

<sup>52</sup> Birgit Meyer, 'Christianity in Africa: From African Independent to Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 447–50. Meyer begins with the socio-structural approach of Durkheim. She then discusses the symbolic ethnography of Ranger and Fernandez, the work of Van Binsbergen and Schoffeleers, and Karen Fields, who use a combination of the first two. Finally, she articulates that it is impossible to separate the sacred from the secular, agreeing with Karen Fields's conclusion. It is instructive to compare this 2004 article with one Meyer wrote in 1998 ('"Make a Complete Break with the Past": Memory and Post-Colonial Modernity in Ghanaian Pentecostalist Discourse', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 28, no. 3 [1998]: 316–49) and see the way in which she has come to question the western methodology and suggest that it is no longer adequate for studying the African context.

In the following chapters, I will argue that defining the single-tiered unitive perspective and using it as an interpretive lens brings much of the Akan interpretive landscape into sharp focus. I will also point to some particular areas where African Christian theologians, because they work from the single-tiered unitive perspective, can make significant contributions to the global theological conversation. In particular, I argue that by calling the West's two-tiered approach into question, African Christian theology challenges the fact-faith divide and offer a way through it.

## **6. STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS**

Following this introductory chapter, in Chapter Two I use the work of Andrew Walls, Kwame Bediako, and Mary Bediako on Africa's primal religious past to isolate the importance of the single-tiered unitive understanding of reality. I then trace the appearance of the unitive perspective in a number of key terms used by Akan scholars as they discuss the Akan cosmology—a world populated by a Supreme God, various deities, spirits, and ancestors. I conclude by looking at Baeta's early work on the 'spiritual churches' of Ghana and Asamoah-Gyadu's more recent study of the 'healing' of Ghana Airways as case studies demonstrating the hermeneutical promise of the single-tiered unitive perspective.

In Chapter Three, I examine Kwame Bediako's idea that 'identity' is now a theological category for articulating African Christian theologies. In practice, Bediako means that his identity, shaped by the unitive perspective of the Akan primal past, now provides him with categories he can use to articulate the gospel. As such, identity also becomes a methodology and hermeneutical key for rightly interpreting Akan Christian theologies. In other words, a careful analysis of Bediako's writings reveals that identity is a three-pronged tool, at once a category, a methodology, and a hermeneutical key in the writing and understanding of Akan Christian theology. I conclude that the Akan

identity—formed inescapably within the unitive understanding of reality emerging out of their primal past—has led Akan theologians such as Kwesi Dickson, Kwame Bediako, John Pobee, and Mercy Oduyoye to an iteration of the gospel that takes full advantage of the many landing places provided by this perspective.

Chapter Four introduces a key discovery in my research, the idea of ‘analogical continuity’. In the study of African religion, the question whether there is continuity between African traditional religions and Christianity bears directly on the larger question whether Christianity is inherently foreign to Africa. The first generation of African Christian scholars argued strenuously for the idea that Christianity was an African religion. They believed that God had revealed himself to Africa prior to the coming of the missionaries; indeed, it was Jesus who called the missionaries to Africa.<sup>53</sup> In this chapter I argue for a continuity located in the shared interpretive landscape emerging from the single-tiered unitive perspective that is found in both the Akan and the biblical map.<sup>54</sup> While many scholars attempt to locate continuity between traditional religions and the Christian faith, I suggest that such efforts miss the actual continuity that can be found in the single-tiered understanding of reality. ‘Analogical continuity’ takes note of horizontal overlaps, places where the similarities are greater than the dissimilarities and which are then able to serve as ‘bridges’ or ‘landing places’ for continuity. Kwame Gyekye describes these as the places where African cultures ‘rub

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<sup>53</sup> Mbiti, John, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1986), 11–12.

<sup>54</sup> I will argue not so much for a direct sharing of maps as for a more general shared understanding of a reality that includes a Supreme Being, deities, angels, demonic beings, ancestors, people, animals, and inanimate objects. While this scheme will not work in every particular for all African cultures, so long as we allow for different ‘colouring’ of the maps, there is significant analogical continuity. This approach also allows for development in both the Bible’s understanding of reality (e.g. *sheol* and hell, or what is meant by bodily resurrection) and that of the Akan. In both cases we are dealing with a dynamic rather than static situation.

shoulders' with each other and with Christian faith.<sup>55</sup> Analogical continuity takes advantage of the numerous landing places for Christian doctrine found within the Akan interpretive landscape, which make many Africans feel that it is a small step from traditional religion to Christian faith.

Chapter Five serves as my first extended case study. In this chapter I use the single-tiered unitive perspective as a hermeneutical lens to examine and analyse an on-going Christological conversation between Kwame Bediako, John Pobee, and other voices from within the Akan Christian theological community. Using the unitive perspective on reality as my interpretive key, I pinpoint why weight is given to one argument over another, where nuances appear that might otherwise be overlooked, and where inconsistencies appear that weaken the argument of one theologian or another. By observing the tacit presence of the unitive perspective I am able to suggest where and why disagreements occur and what is at stake. I also point to why these theologians' use of the unitive perspective is a significant element in their contribution to the global Christian theological conversation.

Finally, in Chapter Six I consider the work of Mercy Amba Oduyoye as a second case study of the effectiveness of the single-tiered unitive perspective as a hermeneutical tool. In particular, I examine how Oduyoye identifies a category for what it means to be fully human within her Akan identity and uses it to accomplish her primary theological project of establishing the full equality of women and men. Another way of saying this is to note that Oduyoye's feminist liberation theology is refracted through the prism of her African identity and finds there a category for establishing the

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<sup>55</sup> Gyekye writes that the appearance of common threads connecting "features of the cultural systems of Africa justify, in my opinion, the assertion that ethnic pluralism does not necessarily or invariably produce absolute verticalism with respect to cultures, allowing no room for shoulder-rubbing of any kind". Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 194.

full equality of men and women. Oduyoye does this by using the Akan understanding that full personhood requires the *mogya* (or blood) of the mother and the *ntoro* (or spirit) of the father, both of which are necessary and perceived as physico-spiritual realities. Further, I place Oduyoye within the context of other Akan scholars who have written on the traditional Akan understanding of what it means to be human. While there is broad general agreement on a four-fold composition that includes both the material and spiritual, differences do emerge. I also show how Oduyoye uses a dual hermeneutic of *experience* and *identity*, woven together like the multi-coloured *kente* cloth that Oduyoye loves, to construct a theology that is both Akan and Christian. This dual hermeneutic also helps to explain some of the friction between Oduyoye and certain western feminist theologians.

In Chapter Seven I conclude this thesis with two assessments. First, just how well does the single-tiered unitive perspective on reality function as an interpretive key for understanding the work of selected Akan theologians? Second, how does this perspective challenge and correct the two-tiered approach of the post-Enlightenment West? I suggest that the single-tiered perspective directly challenges, and offers a credible alternative to, the West's two-tiered approach and its tendency towards the fact-faith divide described by Lesslie Newbigin.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Awakened from my own theological slumbers by reading African Christian theology, I now consider the African voice essential in the global Christian theological conversation. I imagine a corrective that will be bi-directional. Africa has the resources to bring the church in the West back to a unified understanding of the interaction of the natural and supernatural, while the church in the West has its own powerful theological resources—of which a godly scepticism may not be the least—to contribute to the

global church's theological work. Certainly the West provides models to both emulate and eschew; I believe using the critical eye of the single-tiered unitive perspective will prove helpful in discerning which models to follow and which to pass by.<sup>56</sup>

What follows is my attempt to describe and use one particular tool, the single-tiered unitive perspective, to demonstrate some of the ways in which the increasingly rich resources of the church's African theologians will contribute a needed voice to the global Christian theological conversation. Does the single-tiered unitive perspective describe reality? That question is beyond the scope of this thesis. I find myself very much in the same place as Lesslie Newbigin, who argued that we declare with 'universal intent' what we believe to be true, but await the eschaton to see how close or distant we are to the real.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Andrew Walls has suggested that it is a very real possibility that in two hundred years today's western theology will be a historical oddity, much like 'the theology of the Syriac Edessene Church' is to people today. Walls, *Missionary Movement*, 10.

<sup>57</sup> Here the reader will notice, again, an epistemology rooted in Anselm's 'faith seeking understanding'. Since there is no 'epistemological Switzerland' from which one can take a stand and look out over the world as a purely objective, rational observer, I do not even attempt to do so. The attempt could only be dishonest as well as futile. I take my stand with C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Flannery O'Connor, and Ingrid Undset—moderns with pre-Enlightenment sensibilities and instincts.



## **Chapter Two**

### **The Akan Single-Tiered Unitive Perspective:**

#### **Defined and Described**

#### **1. INTRODUCTION**

In this chapter I define ‘single-tiered unitive perspective’ by tracing its roots in Africa’s primal past and showing where the idea appears in the work of a number of Akan theologians. I go on to describe the rational and coherent cosmology that emerges from the robust interaction of power sources operating within this unitive world of the physical and metaphysical, the seen and the unseen. The strength of the phrase ‘single-tiered unitive perspective’—sometimes shortened to ‘unitive perspective’—is its ability to help clarify theological differences among various Akan scholars. The concept functions like a lens that brings nuances within Akan theology into sharp focus. Finally, I show how Christian G. Baeta’s study of ‘Spiritual’ churches and Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu’s article on the ‘healing’ of Ghana’s national airline demonstrate the usefulness of the single-tiered unitive perspective as a hermeneutical tool.

#### **2. WHAT IS THE ‘SINGLE-TIERED UNITIVE PERSPECTIVE’?**

As we have noted, this term refers to the Akan understanding of the world as one in which the natural and supernatural hold together in a robust, interactive whole. It follows, then, that any explanation of events in one’s life must include both spiritual and material causes and effects.

A consideration of Kwame Bediako's understanding of how the Akan primal (or perhaps better, 'anterior')<sup>1</sup> universe compares to the typical western understanding of reality can help us grasp the idea of the single-tiered unitive perspective. According to Bediako, the western approach to reality separates the sacred and secular dimensions into two tiers. This separation—accompanied by the privileging of the secular over the sacred and of material over spiritual cause and effect—has resulted in what Bediako regards as a deeply secularized way of life. Africans, on the other hand, generally do not draw this type of sacred/secular distinction. Bediako argues that Africans have therefore developed an understanding of the Christian faith which 'far from obliterating the African primal view of things, in its essentially unified and 'spiritual' nature ... has in fact reinforced the African view'.<sup>2</sup> Even the advent of science and technology has not produced the kind of secularization experienced in the West, nor has it 'displaced the basic view that the whole universe in which human existence takes place is fundamentally spiritual'.<sup>3</sup> In fact, Bediako suggests that the western church has been

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<sup>1</sup> The word 'primal' has a pejorative ring today. Bediako, and as we shall see, Andrew Walls, both understood the word to be descriptive of features within traditional Akan religio-culture that were present prior to the coming of Christianity but were emphatically not either primitive or of no lasting value.

<sup>2</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 176.

<sup>3</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 176. One of Africa's early Roman Catholic theologians, Msgr. Tharcisse Tshibangu, uses the term 'Black Metaphysics' to describe this underlying African view of reality. Emmanuel Ntakirutimana notes that, as an African, Tshibangu worked from an 'implicit' and 'intuitive' understanding of the world. Consequently, the purely rational western approach to understanding was by definition inadequate for grasping the whole of life as he confronted it on a daily basis. A right understanding of cause and effect required taking into account both mystical and natural causes. According to Ntakirutimana, 'from the point of view of causality, this mystical, participative metaphysics marks an interlocking of metaphysical-religious and empirical-positive causalities. It therefore [makes] difficult a clear-cut division between the sacred and the profane.' Emmanuel Ntakirutimana, 'Msgr. Tharcisse Tshibangu: Champion of an "African-coloured" Theology', *African Theology in the 21st Century: The Contribution of the Pioneers*, ed. Benezet Bujo and Juvenal Ilunga Muya, trans. Silvano Borruso (Nairobi: Paulines, 2003), 50. See also A. O. Balcomb's critique of Enlightenment principles from an African perspective. 'Epistemological Dualism and the Primal Other: Tracing the Contours of the Encounter, Again', in *The Dialogue of Cultural Traditions: A Global Perspective*, ed. William Sweet (Washington, DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2008), 411–30.

ineffective in its opposition to secularization in part because it has lost its own ‘memory’ of a primal past.

In 2008 and 2009 the *Journal of African Christian Thought* published a series of papers on the general theme of what Andrew Walls called ‘the conversion of primal religion’.<sup>4</sup> In his introduction to the series, Walls argues that in the New Testament we see Jewish believers taking their anterior Jewish worldview with them as they became followers of Jesus. They continued to gather and worship in the Temple—their ‘Father’s house’ and a ‘place of prayer for all nations’—because doing so continued to make sense ‘within their existing frames of reference’.<sup>5</sup> According to Walls, then, ‘the first believers did not change their religion, they converted it. The Book of Acts shows us Judaism converted, Jewish religion transformed in the light of the recognition of Jesus as Messiah of Israel’.<sup>6</sup> Yet it was not only Jews who experienced this type of transformation. Gentile Christians, too, ‘began the long process of constructing a Hellenistic way of following Jesus Christ, of turning their Gentile culture towards Christ’.<sup>7</sup> Whereas a Gentile who became a Jew had to become a proselyte, undergoing circumcision, adopting Jewish law, and thus effectively changing cultures, Christianity did away with proselytism in favour of conversion. New converts did not opt out of their former cultures, but instead worked out how their birth cultures might themselves be converted through their encounter with the risen Christ. Walls thus argues that we

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew F. Walls, ‘Editorial: Thoughts on the Background to the Project’, *Journal of African Christian Thought* 11, no. 2 (December 2008): 2. The papers, initially presented at the Akrofi-Christaller Centre in 2008, appeared in vol. 11, no. 2 (December 2008) and vol. 12, no. 1 (June 2009). The introductory editorial was in two parts, the first written by Andrew F. Walls and the second by Kwame Bediako. From the start, they are clear that by ‘primal’ they mean ‘anterior to’ as opposed to ‘primitive’. Walls notes, for example, that primal cultures could be highly literate (Greek) and technological (Egyptian, Incan, Mayan).

<sup>5</sup> Walls, ‘Editorial’, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Walls, ‘Editorial’, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Walls, ‘Editorial’, 1.

see two types of conversion in the New Testament: the conversion of Judaism and the conversion of primal religion.

In a similar way, Walls points to the ongoing conversion of African primal religion through its encounter with Christian faith. By 'conversion', Walls has in mind a re-sizing of African primal maps as they come into contact with Scripture and Christian theology. This process can take place due to the similarities between the African primal religious worldview and the biblical worldview. For his part, Kwame Bediako asserts that these similarities are in fact evidence that primal religion forms the substructure of biblical Christianity. He is supported in this by another Akan scholar, Benhardt Quarshie, who observes the primal substructure in Paul's writings and notes its missiological implications in present day Ghana.<sup>8</sup> Mary Bediako, too, agrees that the Enlightenment project had 'obscured' this primal facet of Christianity by placing reason and its tools in the role of truth arbiter. Further, she argues that what is happening in Africa will help advance the missiological endeavour of the global church.

The task of biblical scholars and theologians from the South, who retain their primal memory, is to rescue Christian scholarship from the clutches of the Enlightenment that has done such harm to Western Christian scholarship and now continues to exert its influence by deflecting Christian scholarship away from truly religious and theological concerns. This task is not for the sake of Christian mission and scholarship in the South alone, it is for the sake of the Christian community and Christian mission throughout the world.<sup>9</sup>

Kwame Bediako's critique of the western two-tiered approach is intended to pinpoint how he and his Akan colleagues understand the world. An accurate discussion

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<sup>8</sup> Benhardt Y. Quarshie, 'Paul and the Primal Substructure of Christianity: Missiological Reflections on the Epistle to the Galatians', *Journal of African Christian Thought* 12, no. 1 (June 2009): 8–14.

<sup>9</sup> Gillian Mary Bediako, 'Old Testament Religion as Primal Substructure of Christianity: Questions and Issues', *Journal of African Christian Thought* 12, no. 1 (June 2009): 7. Mary Bediako writes as a highly informed western scholar who has chosen to write from an African perspective. She argues that the Enlightenment harmed Christian scholars' ability to see the Old Testament as a record of the interaction of Yahweh with the primal religions of the ancient near eastern world, with the result that western scholarship has difficulty seeing the connections and overlaps between African primal religion and biblical Christianity.

of the Akan context must therefore allow the single-tiered unitive perspective to describe the Akan understanding of reality. This conviction lies behind Bediako's caution about exclusive reliance on the social sciences—themselves products of the two-tiered Enlightenment—to understand African religion. The theologian also has a contribution to make, which is rooted in the fact that for Bediako and his colleagues the primal is not just the past, but the present. He writes,

We are persons who are Christian now but are also aware of the primal substructure, which is not to be dismissed as 'pagan'. What we are seeking therefore is a theological interpretation of this Christian substructure. We need other disciplines, such as anthropology, sociology and history, but the end product of our research should be a fuller account of the Christian gospel.<sup>10</sup>

Bediako concludes by asserting that western theological scholars failed to understand the African theological context because they set 'parameters' that fell short of the interpretive horizon of the unitive perspective and therefore could not understand what he and his colleagues were attempting. Bediako insists that Africans

are an ancient people, and our scholarship should take account of that past. So we need a new kind of scholarship ... articulating the recognition that primal religion is the substructure of Christianity, drawing on data that is not in books but in lives, history, memories and traditions. Only scholars from the South can do this, as we develop our own fields, using new methods and approaches that are consistent with the data. For at the centre of our project is indigenous religious experience, of which we are also the bearers.<sup>11</sup>

Bediako is intent on describing this tradition because he believes it will serve as the basis for Africa's contribution to the global Christian theological project, a contribution

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<sup>10</sup> Kwame Bediako, 'Editorial: Thoughts on the Nature of the Project', *Journal of African Christian Thought* 11, no. 2 (December 2008): 4.

<sup>11</sup> Bediako, 'Editorial', 4. In his earlier book, *Christianity in Africa*, Bediako pointed to Edward Blyden who wrote, 'Owing to the intense and increasing materialism of Europe, especially Anglo-Saxondom, the people have lost touch with the spirit world. This is no reason why Africans should forget the privileges enjoyed by their fathers. The intercommunion between the people of the earth and those in the spiritual sphere is a cardinal belief of the African and will never be uprooted.' Edward Wilmot Blyden, *African Life and Customs* (London: Phillips, 1908), 69; quoted in Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 11.

rooted in the African primal tradition on the one hand and the African experience of the Christian gospel on the other.<sup>12</sup>

### **3. DESCRIPTIVES USED FOR THE SINGLE-TIERED ONTOLOGY**

My research demonstrates that Akan scholars use a number of different terms to describe the single-tiered sub-structure that Walls, Bediako, and others find in the Akan primal tradition and in the Bible,<sup>13</sup> dating as far back as the seminal 1955 ‘Report’ of the Christian Council of the Gold Coast. A careful reading of the literature reveals the nuances that emerge based on how particular scholars use the single-tiered perspective. I will demonstrate more precisely how these nuances result in different emphases and are used for different purposes in the conclusion to this chapter.

#### **3.1 Ashanti World View**

The term ‘world view’ was used by some of Ghana’s earliest theologians. In 1954, K. A. Busia challenged African Christian scholars to ‘come to grips with traditional beliefs and practices, and with the world-view that these beliefs and practices imply’ in order to properly equip African Christians to navigate their way between the two worlds of ‘the old traditions and customs he is striving to leave behind [and] the new beliefs and practices to which he is still a stranger’.<sup>14</sup> Sidney George Williamson quoted this passage from Busia in his introduction to the Christian Council of the Gold Coast’s 1955 report, titled *Christianity and African Culture*, in which scholars responded to

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<sup>12</sup> Kwame Bediako, ‘Types of African Theology’, in *Christianity in Africa in the 1990s*, ed. Christopher Fyfe and Andrew F. Walls (Edinburgh: Centre of African Studies, 1996), 61–62.

<sup>13</sup> By ‘scholars’, I am referring primarily to theologians. However, scholars in other disciplines have also written with an understanding of the single-tiered perspectives. Their ranks have included social scientists such as J. B. Danquah and, later, philosophers such as Kwame Gyekye.

<sup>14</sup> Sidney G. Williamson, ‘Introduction’, in *Christianity and African Culture: The Proceedings of a Conference Held at Accra, Gold Coast, May 2nd–6th, 1955 under the Auspices of the Christian Council* (Accra: Christian Council of the Gold Coast, 1955), iii.

Busia's challenge. In doing so, Williamson emphasizes the necessity of dealing with the Ashanti world view in order to move the conversation beyond the superficial.

In his own contribution to the 1955 report,<sup>15</sup> Busia notes that Europeans have great confidence in the power of natural cause and effect, especially in medicine and science, to explain and help them control their environment. While acknowledging that Africa has not yet reached that point in its development, he remains unwilling to suggest that Africa should follow the West in its exclusive attention to natural cause and effect. Instead, he argues that the African understanding of reality—which includes both the natural and the supernatural, and thus both material and spiritual cause and effect—is more inclusive than the western approach. Busia writes, for example, that African farmers are perfectly aware of the need for rain, cultivation of fields, and application of fertilizers, even if they do not have as many of these tools as farmers in the West. When 'the African offers an egg to a tree, or food to a dead ancestor, he is not expressing ignorance of material substances, or natural causes, but he is expressing in conduct a theory of reality, namely that behind the visible substance of things lie essences, or powers which constitute their true nature'.<sup>16</sup> Busia objects to the notion that Africans need to give up their understanding as mere superstition, arguing instead that the West may need to learn from Africa. Europeans, he notes, may have lulled themselves into giving too little attention to non-material causes due to the success of their technology.

In another essay published in the 1955 Gold Coast report,<sup>17</sup> E. A. Asamoah draws a very helpful distinction between 'the African *view of the cosmos* and the traditional *practices* that are associated with it'. This follows his suggestion that the Church—

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<sup>15</sup> K. A. Busia, 'The African World View', in *Christianity and African Culture*, 1–6.

<sup>16</sup> Busia, 'African World View', 4.

<sup>17</sup> E. A. Asamoah, 'The Influence of Fetishism', in *Christianity and African Culture*, 39–45.

particularly western-influenced elements of the African church of the mid-1950s—needed to take seriously the world of the spirits. Writing cautiously but insisting that the African view of the cosmos has something of value for the larger church, he argues that the church ‘should be able to acknowledge that *the supernatural world in which the African believes is a reality*. Africans raise the challenge to the whole world whether beyond the visible nature of natural science there are invisible beings who are closely associated with men and can influence them for good or evil.’<sup>18</sup>

Asamoah makes a two-fold contribution to the early development of African theology in this essay. First, he distinguishes between the African world view and the traditional religious practices growing out of that world view. His focus is not on Africa’s traditional religions but on the world view to which they respond. As he puts it, ‘we should distinguish between what the African *believes* and *what he does to adjust his life* to what he believes’.<sup>19</sup> Second, he challenges the West to take seriously the ontological reality of the spiritual world, as well as its role in shaping an African understanding of epistemology. In essence, he joins metaphysics and epistemology and insists that both be taken seriously in any investigation of Christianity and African religio-culture.

Asamoah effectively pinpointed the signal importance of the unitive perspective as a key for understanding and writing African theology. As yet unspoken was the point

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<sup>18</sup> Asamoah, ‘Influence of Fetishism’, 44–45; italics added. See also Harris W. Mobley’s discussion of Asamoah’s article in *The Ghanaian’s Image of the Missionary* (Leiden: Brill, 1970), 111.

<sup>19</sup> Asamoah, ‘Influence of Fetishism’, 44–45; italics added. Later scholars echoed Asamoah’s ideas and emphasis on the reality of this both/and, physico-spiritual world. See Jean Masamba ma Mpolo, ‘A Brief Review of Psychiatric Research in Africa: Some Implications for Pastoral Counseling’, in *Pastoral Care and Counseling in Africa Today*, ed. Jean Masamba Mpolo and Daisy Nwachuku (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1991), 23; Amon Eddie Kasambala, ‘The Impact of an African Spirituality and Cosmology on God-Images in Africa: A Challenge to Practical Theology and Pastoral Ministry’, *International Journal of Practical Theology* 9 (2005): 309; Isaiah Dau, ‘The Problem of Evil and Suffering: Theological Reflections from an African Perspective’, in *African Theology on the Way: Current Conversations*, ed. Diane B. Stinton (London: SPCK, 2010), 119.



that the biblical world's perspective is much closer to Africa's single-tiered unitive perspective on reality than it is to the post-Enlightenment West's two-tiered understanding, which was brought to Africa unwittingly through the tacit assumptions of the colonial missionaries.

### 3.2 Living Universe

Kwesi Dickson uses the term 'living universe' to describe a coherent world in which material and spiritual elements are inseparable. This term is particularly helpful in its reminder that any attempt to separate them would, in effect, render the Akan world a corpse. According to Dickson, 'to appreciate African religion one has to first appreciate this attitude to the environment'—that is, the world as the African knows it.<sup>20</sup>

Dickson was not the first to use the term 'living universe'. In his introduction to *Akan Religion*, S. G. Williamson points to R. S. Rattray's observations that the Akan see reality holistically, without making 'watertight distinctions between the sacred and the secular' and that 'an interest in Akan religion appears to require consideration of the total life of the people'.<sup>21</sup> Williamson then describes the Akan 'living universe' as 'a universe as seen from without of Gods and men and things, a universe instinct with spirit-power'.<sup>22</sup> Following Rattray, he points out that 'the traditional Akan world view makes no clear distinction between the sacred and the secular, and for this reason it has proved impossible to treat ... religion without some reference to the social and political institutions which sustain it'. Therefore, '*any influence which affects the Akan's closely integrated social and religious system even at the circumference is likely to cause*

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<sup>20</sup> Kwesi A. Dickson, *Theology in Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984), 52.

<sup>21</sup> Sidney G. Williamson, *Akan Religion and the Christian Faith*, ed. Kwesi A. Dickson (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1965), xv–xvi.

<sup>22</sup> Williamson, *Akan Religion and the Christian Faith*, 97.

*disturbance at the centre*'.<sup>23</sup> In other words, the unity of the Akan view of reality means that anything that affects the physical has repercussions in the spiritual, and vice versa.<sup>24</sup>

Ogbu Kalu speaks of an 'alive universe' that missionaries to Africa did not understand. He describes a world where power is 'central', and a primary question is how to manipulate and control the many sources of power found principally in the spirit dimension in order to achieve 'abundant life'. According to Kalu, while in the West power is in a split atom and all else seems to pale in comparison, in Africa the world 'is suffused with powerful forces in competition; humans manipulate the services of the good gods against the machination of the evil ones, in the quest for an abundant life'.<sup>25</sup>

The designation 'living universe' emphasizes the fluid, non-static nature of the single-tiered unitive perspective. It points to a cosmos in which the material and the spiritual live and overlap, and in which manipulating and controlling sources of power is immensely practical.

### 3.3 Sacramental Universe

Though the term 'sacramental universe' has a history in previous scholarship,<sup>26</sup> Harold W. Turner appears to be one of the first scholars to use it in a discussion of the African

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<sup>23</sup> Williamson, *Akan Religion and the Christian Faith*, 112; italics added.

<sup>24</sup> C.f. Benezet Bujo's comment: 'In African religion and ethics, everything in the world is intimately connected. All the elements in the universe are related to each other in an interlocking way. One cannot touch one of them without causing the whole to vibrate.' Benezet Bujo, 'Distinctives of African Ethics', in Stinton, 81.

<sup>25</sup> Ogbu U. Kalu, *Power, Poverty and Prayer* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2000), 118–19.

<sup>26</sup> Allan Bowman appears to have been the first scholar to use the phrase 'sacramental universe'. Delivering the Vanuxem Lectures at Princeton University in 1934, he argued that there are grounds for believing that the world we live in may be conceived of as both 'non-subjective' and physical, and 'subjective' or spiritual. According to Bowman, 'while nothing can detract from the ontological distinctiveness of the dual opposites, the spiritual and the physical enter into relations of a highly determinate character, from which arise certain new possibilities of being. ... Thus nature reflects the life of spirit in meanings that spirit imparts to the inanimate and non-spiritual. A universe in which such possibilities exist is a sacramental universe.' Archibald Allan Bowman, *A Sacramental Universe*, ed. J. W. Scott (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1939), 10. William Temple also used the phrase in 1934 in the context of his Gifford Lectures, delivered at the University of Glasgow. Temple discussed his understanding of a universe in which 'the order of thought is spirit first and spirit last, with matter as the

context. In a 1977 article, ‘The Primal Religions of the World and Their Study’, Turner uses ‘sacramental universe’ to describe African cultures’ understanding of reality as a single-tiered ontological structure.<sup>27</sup> Other African scholars, including Kwame Bediako, J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, and Frank Kwesi Adams, have also used this phrase.<sup>28</sup>

J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu uses the term ‘sacramental universe’ to make a point similar to Ogbu Kalu’s regarding the important role of practical concerns in Africans’ efforts to live abundant lives. For Asamoah-Gyadu, understanding this sacramental universe explains why Ghanaians take spiritual causes and effects seriously, even in matters such as airline accidents.<sup>29</sup> They do so not because Africans are ‘incurably religious’<sup>30</sup>—a phrase Asamoah-Gyadu regards as dismissive—but because this outlook

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effectual expression or symbolic instrument of spirit. That is the formula which we suggest as an articulation of the essential relations of spirit and matter in the universe.’ William Temple, ‘Lecture 19: The Sacramental Universe’, in *Nature, Man and God*, Gifford Lectures, accessed March 1, 2017, <https://www.giffordlectures.org/books/nature-man-and-god>.

<sup>27</sup> H. W. Turner, ‘The Primal Religions of the World and Their Study’, in *Australian Essays in World Religions*, ed. Victor Hayes (Bedford Park, Australian Association for World Religions, 1977), 27–37.

<sup>28</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 95; J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, “‘Christ Is the Answer’: What Is the Question? A Ghana Airways Prayer Vigil and Its Implications for Religion, Evil and Public Space’, *Journal of Religion in Africa* 35 (February 2005): 93–117; Frank Kwesi Adams, *Odwira and the Gospel* (Oxford: Regnum, 2010), 5.

<sup>29</sup> Asamoah-Gyadu, ‘Christ Is the Answer’, 93–117.

<sup>30</sup> This phrase appears in G. Parrinder, *Religion in Africa* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 235. However, Jan Platvoet and Henk van Rinsum, who cite it, cannot say when the actual phrase was first used. Jan Platvoet and Henk van Rinsum sparked a lively debate in the journal *Exchange* with a 2003 article that asked, ‘Is Africa Incurably Religious?’. While Platvoet and van Rinsum did not invent this phrase—they note that it occurs in G. Parrinder’s *Religion in Africa* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 235, though they cannot say whether this is its first appearance—their prominent use of the term prompted a refutation from Kehinde Olabimtan later in 2003. Platvoet and van Rinsum responded in turn five years later. Jan Platvoet and Henk van Rinsum, ‘Is Africa Incurably Religious? Confessing and Contesting an Invention’, *Exchange* 32, no. 2 (2003): 123–52; Kehinde Olabimtan, “‘Is Africa Incurably Religious?’ II: A Response to Jan Platvoet and Henk van Rinsum’, *Exchange* 32, no. 4 (2003): 322–39; Jan Platvoet and Henk van Rinsum, “‘Is Africa Incurably Religious?’ III: A Reply to a Rhetorical Response’, *Exchange* 37, no. 2 (2008): 156–73.

In their second article, Platvoet and van Rinsum acknowledge the single-tiered ontological structure in African indigenous religions, writing, ‘In African indigenous religions and again in virtually all other religions—the phenomenal world and the hierarchically graded spirit world interpenetrate ... believers take the “unseen” not only to be “transcendent” but also as “immanent”: the “spiritual” or “mystical” is, in the eyes of the believers, not only “meta-empirical” but also “intra-” or “infra-empirical” and is thought of as also, or even mostly, taking material forms’. Oddly, however, Platvoet and van Rinsum then assert that events in the post-Newtonian West ‘forced the “spiritual” to retreat to the “transcendent” and placed an ever thicker cosmological ceiling between the spiritually empty perceptible

makes sense in the context of a single-tiered world. In the ‘worldview that we constantly see being played out in [the] African public space’, the sacramental universe ‘does not sharply dichotomize between the physical and the spiritual realms of existence’.<sup>31</sup> In such a universe, the physical and spiritual must both be accounted for—either-or is not an option. In the success of a major airline as in any other realm of life, then, human irresponsibility may explain some problems, but not all.

Even as he recognizes the impact of ‘modernization, development and globalization’ in contemporary Africa, Asamoah-Gyadu demonstrates that the physical continues to act in the African context ‘as a vehicle for developments in the supernatural realm’.<sup>32</sup> He further notes that while modernity has nudged God out of the picture in the West, it has done nothing similar in Africa. The predictions of those who expected modernization to bring secularization have so far been proven wrong.<sup>33</sup> What these expectations failed to take into account is that modernity itself requires abandoning the Akan perception of a single-tiered structure of reality in favour of the West’s two-tiered approach. Africans have not made this switch, Asamoah-Gyadu suggests, in part because they observe not only the West’s successes but its many failures to help people explain, predict, and control their world.<sup>34</sup> Given the limitations

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realm, and the (postulated) meta-empirical world(s) of spiritual beings, causing communication with it or them to atrophy and religion to be conceived no longer as communication but as meaning, concern or cosmology’ (170). Platvoet and van Rinsum refute Olabimtan’s charge that they are atheists, but argue that their use of ‘methodological agnosticism’ is appropriate because the limits of their academic discipline require them to study only those aspects of religion open to ‘scientific’ investigation—which, as they explain it, excludes the option of recourse to supernatural explanations. They appear to acknowledge that if the supernatural is indeed real, their studies of religion will always be partial—but they insist that, as scholars, they must remain agnostic on the question.

<sup>31</sup> Asamoah-Gyadu, ‘Christ Is the Answer’, 95.

<sup>32</sup> Asamoah-Gyadu, ‘Christ Is the Answer’, 95.

<sup>33</sup> See Chapter One, Section Four of this dissertation for a discussion of this point.

<sup>34</sup> Asamoah-Gyadu’s use of the concepts ‘explaining’, ‘predicting’, and ‘controlling’ draws on Robin Horton’s well-known phrase. For an extensive discussion of this explanatory frame of reference, see Robin Horton, *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993).

of the typical western perspective, why would Africans not continue to rely upon ‘prayer, sacrifice and offerings, in fact religious ritual in general ... to achieve the practical ends of success, prosperity and general wellbeing’?<sup>35</sup>

### **3.4 Asante/Akan Cosmology: Spiritualized Social Field**

The single-tiered unitive perspective proves particularly helpful when we apply it as a kind of ‘scale’ with which to weigh the Asante cosmology against that of the West. Applied to Pashington Obeng’s analysis of Asante Catholicism, for example, it almost immediately reveals the source of Asante Roman Catholics’ confidence in their theological dialogue with the West. The unitive perspective gives Asante Catholics a frame of reference, an interpretive horizon, within which to practice their faith. Consequently, they understand God and the divinities to be operating in what Obeng calls ‘a spiritualized social field’ that emerges from the ‘indigenous Asante cosmology’.<sup>36</sup>

Obeng, a Presbyterian scholar and student of Asante Catholicism, observes that Asante Catholics are comfortable practicing their faith as Asante, even if some of their practices are not seen elsewhere in the Roman Catholic world. When a Catholic market woman asks the priest to bless her with holy water so her business might prosper, or a secretary asks that a necklace given to her by a relative she suspects of being a witch be blessed before she wears it, ‘both Catholics are expressing a certain belief which is consistent with the Asante world view’. Regardless of whether Catholics elsewhere ask for such blessings from their priests, or whether these actions ‘tally’ with what

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<sup>35</sup> Asamoah-Gyadu, ‘Christ Is the Answer’, 114.

<sup>36</sup> Pashington Obeng, *Asante Catholicism: Religious and Cultural Reproduction among the Akan of Ghana* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 47–48.

Catholics do in other parts of the world, these women very much ‘belong to the Catholic world’.<sup>37</sup>

Obeng insists that Asante Catholics are under no obligation to conform their understanding of the cosmos, ‘which consists of a Supreme Being, other spirit beings, ancestors, witches, etc.’ and ‘has its own internal consistency based on the people’s socio-historical experiences’, to the material world view of Europe. Recent ‘religious reconstruction occurring among Asante Catholics’, largely conducted under the leadership of Bishop Peter Sarpong, ‘can therefore best be understood as a result of the interaction between Asante cosmology and that of Roman Catholicism’.<sup>38</sup> Obeng finds one mark of the increasing self-confidence of the African Catholic Church in the Final Declaration of the 1979 document titled, ‘Le colloque d’Accra’. Commenting on this document, Modeste Malu Nyimi suggests that the Roman Catholic Church outside of Africa would do well to take seriously the ‘traditional’ African refusal to separate the ‘sacred and secular’. This document suggests that the healthier way forward is to recognize that ‘it is in the secular context that the sacred [is] experienced’.<sup>39</sup>

### **3.5 Kwame Gyekye: Paranormal Cognition in a Spiritual Universe**

Kwame Gyekye, an influential Ghanaian Akan philosopher, develops an argument that brings us back to Asamoa’s recognition that metaphysics and epistemology come together in African thought. The single-tiered unitive perspective is front and centre in Gyekye’s description of Akan epistemology—which, he argues, necessarily takes into account both physical and spiritual forces because ‘there is no distinction between

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<sup>37</sup> Obeng, *Asante Catholicism*, 10.

<sup>38</sup> Obeng, *Asante Catholicism*, 10.

<sup>39</sup> Modeste Malu Nyimi, ‘Church Base Communities in African Theology: Gospel Fellowships and Socio-political Initiatives’, in *African Christianities*, ed. Eloi Messi Metogo, trans. Paul Burns, J. G. Cumming, and Felicity Leng (London: SCM, 2006), 31.

the sensible (perceivable) world and the nonsensible (non-perceivable) world in the sense of the latter being real and the former being unreal, as in other metaphysical systems'.<sup>40</sup> In making his argument for the greater significance of 'the non-perceivable, purely spiritual world' as compared to the seen, material world, Gyekye emphasizes that not only are the Supreme Being, deities, and ancestors spiritual, but so too is 'man'.<sup>41</sup> All cause and effect explanations thus involve this community of the seen and unseen.

Gyekye writes,

The Akan universe is a spiritual universe, one in which supernatural beings play significant roles in the thought and action of the people. What is primarily real is spiritual. It must be noted, however, that the world of natural phenomena is also real, even though in ultimate terms the non-perceivable, purely spiritual world is more real, for upon it the perceivable, phenomenal world depends for sustenance.<sup>42</sup>

There is no sense, then, of the seen being more real than the unseen; the only distinction is between the seen being perceivable by the senses and the unseen being non-perceivable.

Gyekye uses the term 'paranormal cognition' to describe this third way of knowing in African epistemology. Where in the West people know either by rationalism or empiricism—thinking or experience—Gyekye argues that Africans have a third way of knowing, one tied to 'spirit mediumship, divination, and witchcraft'. He goes on to note that 'these modes of cognition are of course occasioned by means that differ from, but work alongside (para), the normal'.<sup>43</sup> Gyekye also firmly asserts that 'the fact that

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<sup>40</sup> Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 68.

<sup>41</sup> It should be noted that many of the sources referenced and quoted in this dissertation use the word 'man' in its older sense to refer to humans, irrespective of gender. In my own discussion, I will use the more inclusive terms 'humanity', 'people', or 'mankind'.

<sup>42</sup> Gyekye, *African Philosophical Thought*, 68–69.

<sup>43</sup> Gyekye, *African Philosophical Thought*, 202.

this mode of knowing does not occur, or occurs only marginally, in Western epistemology is irrelevant'.<sup>44</sup>

Like Busia, Gyekye points out that the Akan are perfectly cognizant of the cause and effect relationships at work in the world of nature. They observe, however, that the natural order is rarely so uniform that its predictions are infallible. 'For the Akan, then, a purely scientific or naturalistic explanation of natural events presupposes an absolute regularity or uniformity in nature. But such an absolute uniformity is subverted by the existence of irregular, abnormal occurrences.'<sup>45</sup> Gyekye emphasizes that a merely physical explanation is too simplistic to sufficiently address the complexity of life as experienced by the Akan, while appeals to 'chance' also fails to satisfy a person shaped by the single-tiered unitive understanding of reality. Reference to 'mystical power' is therefore necessary to reach an explanation that will satisfy the African imagination.<sup>46</sup> Closely connected to the Akan understanding of causation is an understanding of destiny as wrapped up in the supernaturally-given *kra* – that part of a person which comes from the Creator and returns to him at death, sometimes equated with the soul of a person.<sup>47</sup> Gyekye notes that while some believe this destiny is chosen and others hold that it is conferred upon them by God, the concept unquestionably requires a permeable natural and supernatural reality.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Gyekye, *African Philosophical Thought*, 6.

<sup>45</sup> Gyekye, *African Philosophical Thought*, 80.

<sup>46</sup> Gyekye, *African Philosophical Thought*, 198.

<sup>47</sup> This is a very preliminary definition. We will return to this concept in Chapter Six, as part of our examination of Mercy Oduyoye's theological anthropology where it will be treated at length.

<sup>48</sup> 'What is not clear is whether fate is self-determined, that is, chosen or decided upon by the individual soul or divinely imposed. Some African peoples think that destiny is chosen by the individual whereas others think that it is conferred by the Supreme Being. ... However, whatever the source of the individual's destiny, the fact remains ... that the individual enters the world with a predetermined destiny.' Gyekye, *African Philosophical Thought*, 200. Cf. Williamson, *Akan Religion and the Christian Faith*, 92.



### 3.6 John Mbiti: An African Ontology

Although the Kenyan scholar John Mbiti falls outside the circle of Akan theologians with whom this study is primarily concerned, he is a towering figure in African Christian theology and needs to be considered here. Mbiti uses the term ‘African ontology’ to describe an understanding of the world constructed out of five delicately balanced features—(1) God, (2) Spirits, (3) humans (born and unborn), (4) animals and plants, and (5) phenomena and objects without biological life—such that none can be removed without destroying the whole.<sup>49</sup>

In his 1969 book, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Mbiti argues that African traditional religion and philosophy had been, at that point in time, only superficially affected by the influence of the West. Africans themselves had not adopted the western ontology that divides the natural and supernatural, the material and spiritual, into separate and essentially independent categories. In Africa, he writes, ‘religion’ is present everywhere:

wherever the African is, there is his religion: he carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician he takes it to the house of parliament.<sup>50</sup>

As Mbiti uses the word, ‘religion’ is never a mere sub-set of culture. Rather, religion is at the very centre of culture, identifying the tacit structure of reality in which the spiritual and material areas of life are understood to be inseparably connected. In other words, Mbiti recognizes and describes the single-tiered unitive substructure to religion in Africa while pinpointing its absolute importance.

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<sup>49</sup> John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Praeger, 1969).

<sup>50</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2.

Mbiti calls this understanding of reality the ‘African ontology’. He notes that the western failure to understand this ontology led missionaries, colonial administrators, and scholars alike ‘to misunderstand not only the religions as such but the people of Africa’, resulting, in his view, in the planting of ‘only a very superficial type of Christianity on African soil’.<sup>51</sup> The Christianity brought by the missionaries seemed lacking to people who were used to thinking of God ‘in terms of His supplying them with rain, good harvest, health, cattle and children; in healing, delivering and helping them; and in terms of making His presence felt through natural phenomena and objects’.<sup>52</sup>

With the exception of Mbiti, we have so far looked only at Akan Ghanaians, or scholars whose primary work was in the area of Akan thought. It is worth noting however, that a number of other scholars of African thought have discussed what I am calling the Akan single-tiered unitive perspective. I will briefly mention just two: John V. Taylor and Robert Fisher.

### **3.7 John V. Taylor: Primal Vision and Physico-Spiritual Universe**

John V. Taylor has used at least two designations to refer to Africa’s single-tiered ontology: ‘primal vision’, and ‘physico-spiritual universe’.<sup>53</sup> It is worth noting that J. N. K. Mugambi, who wrote a very helpful ‘Introduction’ to the 2001 re-issue of Taylor’s *The Primal Vision*, used the word ‘monistic’ to describe Taylor’s understanding of the traditional African worldview. In doing so, Mugambi clarifies Taylor’s belief that the physical and spiritual are inseparable in the African understanding of reality. Mugambi

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<sup>51</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 15.

<sup>52</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 47.

<sup>53</sup> John V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence amid African Religion*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM, 2001). The first edition of this book was published in 1963.

noted with appreciation that Taylor made the effort to ‘enter into the monistic African world-view’, something that few of Taylor’s fellow missionaries attempted, ‘and discovered insights which thoroughly shook the Cartesian intellectual tradition on which the modern missionary enterprise has been nurtured’.<sup>54</sup> Mugambi also observes that ‘it is difficult for the Western mind, trained to see distinctions and antitheses, to grasp how all-inclusive and self-sufficient is this African world’.<sup>55</sup> Mugambi sees Taylor’s overcoming of this difficulty as truly laudable.

Problematically for some, Taylor also uses the term ‘primal vision’ to describe a worldview foundational to and giving birth to Africa’s many different traditional religions. A better word might be ‘primary’ (or Walls’s ‘anterior’), because Taylor uses ‘primal’ to refer to the underlying experience of reality to which Africans respond. Taylor argues that despite the variations we see in Africa’s traditional religions, they all respond to the same underlying vision of reality.

Is it possible to speak of African Religion as if it were one and the same throughout the continent south of the Sahara? Certainly there is not one homogenous system of belief throughout Africa. ... Nevertheless anyone who has read a number of ethnological works dealing with different parts of Africa must be struck not only by the remarkable number of features that are common but by the emergence of a basic world-view which fundamentally is everywhere the same. To quote an Akan proverb, *man’s one speech has thirty varieties but they are slight*.<sup>56</sup>

Taylor agrees with those who suggest that the African way of thinking may in fact be superior to western materialism. ‘This African way is being opposed and compared, consciously or unwittingly, to the ways of the Western world, and no longer does the

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<sup>54</sup> J. N. K. Mugambi, introduction to Taylor, xxiii–xxiv. Mugambi goes on to write that John Mbiti’s re-working of Descartes’ ‘I think, therefore I am’ with ‘I am because we are, and because we are, therefore I am’ expressed ‘Taylor’s formulation of African self- understanding,’ xxiii–xxiv.

<sup>55</sup> Mugambi, introduction to Taylor, xxiv–xxv.

<sup>56</sup> Taylor, *Primal Vision*, 10.

balance come down decisively on the side of Europe.<sup>57</sup> Without sentimentalizing Africa or African thinking, Taylor concludes that ‘the primal vision is of a world of presences, of face-to-face meeting not only with the living but just as vividly with the dead and with the whole totality of nature. It is a universe of I and Thou.’<sup>58</sup> In Africa, this robust and inclusive vision of reality ‘is there and the longing is everywhere alive—which is more than we of the West can say’.<sup>59</sup>

The second descriptive expression Taylor uses for the African single-tiered perspective is ‘physico-spiritual universe’. He coins this term in his discussion of healing in Africa, noting that western doctors may need to pay more attention to prayer for healing—as Africans already do.<sup>60</sup> Taylor’s work is important because it challenges the Hellenistic, Cartesian view of reality held in the West. Taylor argues that the West needs to grapple seriously with Africa’s unitive understanding of the world, which he calls Africa’s ‘primal vision’.

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<sup>57</sup> Taylor, *Primal Vision*, 12.

<sup>58</sup> Taylor is echoing Martin Buber’s *I and Thou* (originally published in German in 1923; first English edition translated by Ronald Gregor Smith [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1937]), a book with mystical elements that was very popular in twentieth-century Europe and North America.

<sup>59</sup> Taylor, *Primal Vision*, 135–36. In a postscript written twenty years after the book was first published, Taylor wrote, ‘It should not surprise us that the Independent African churches and the Pentecostals have been far more free to develop a ministry of social reconciliation, exorcism and deliverance as a normal feature of their pastoral care, emphasizing the Lordship of Christ and the supreme power of the Holy Spirit. They also include the spiritual healing of sickness, in as much as the harmony or health of a human body is, in African eyes, part and parcel of the social harmony of the body corporate’ (150).

<sup>60</sup> In another work, Taylor writes, ‘All Christians, but especially those working in cultures that are not dominated by western thought, should keep a scrupulously open mind towards what is commonly called “faith healing”. The ministry of certain men through whom the healing power of the Christian community seems to be channelled offers incontrovertible evidence not only of a power of diagnosis which is a form of extra-sensory perception, but of processes of restoration, which we have not yet learned to identify or explain, operating in the little known realm of person-to-person interaction in a physico-spiritual universe.’ John V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God* (London: SCM, 1972), 213.

### 3.8 Robert Fisher: Unified Akan Cosmos or Religious Basis of Life

Robert Fisher, a Catholic priest and anthropologist, points out that while anthropologists may make religion one facet of their larger study of culture, such a distinction is impossible for the Akan.

From dance to talking drums, from language to ritual prayer and symbol, from storytelling to proverb and wit, the Akan cosmos reflects a traditional system of life replete with rituals, beliefs, behavior, and worldviews that we in the West call religious. Akan religion is so different from the highly moralistic and dogmatic notions we have inherited from Christianity, Judaism, and even from Islam that much of what is described is dismissed as mere superstition, primitive, or simply weird.<sup>61</sup>

Fisher thus reinforces the wisdom of referring to Akan ‘religio-culture’, concluding that western scholars will flounder in their attempts to accurately portray what they are seeing until they understand this inseparability of religion and culture. He goes so far as to say that ‘without the correct understanding of the religious basis of reality, we cannot begin to grasp the West African worldview’.<sup>62</sup>

### 3.9 Cautionary Voices—Aylward Shorter and David Westerlund

Writing in 1978, Aylward Shorter argued against the notion of a basic African world view. His objection, however, is ambiguous. He does not reject the possibility that such a basic worldview exists, only that at the time of his writing, the existence of such a world view had not yet been ‘clearly proved through systematic comparative analysis’.<sup>63</sup>

Shorter is reacting to the publication of John Mbiti’s 1969 work, *African Religion and Philosophy* (cited in a footnote), in which he believed Mbiti drew broad conclusions

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<sup>61</sup> Robert B. Fisher, *West African Religious Traditions: Focus on the Akan of Ghana* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998), 90.

<sup>62</sup> Fisher, *West African Religious Traditions*, 102.

<sup>63</sup> The full quote is: ‘A basic African world view or a fundamental religious philosophy underlying the different religious manifestations, [cannot be said to exist] unless the existence of such a world view or such a philosophy can be clearly proved through systematic comparative analysis.’ Aylward Shorter, ‘Recent Developments in African Christian Spirituality’, in Fasholé-Luke, Gray, Hastings, and Tasie, 532.

based on too little evidence.<sup>64</sup> At the same time, Shorter recognizes ‘a coherent system, worthy of respect’ within Africa’s traditional religions and is critical of missionaries who could not see how Christian spirituality in Africa might benefit from such systems.<sup>65</sup> His use of the term ‘coherent system’ certainly raises the idea of worldview(s). That being said, the danger of generalizing is always one to consider seriously.

David Westerlund’s hesitancy is of a different kind. He points to evidence that there is a shift among Africa’s indigenous peoples toward pointing to human agents rather than spiritual beings as most responsible for disease—that is, human agents are blamed for causing supernatural afflictions by manipulating spiritual realities using the evil eye or abilities that are rooted in physical glands some people possess, to cause supernatural affliction of disease. We should note, however, that this shift moves toward an explanation that is still dependent upon the single tiered unitive perspective of the primal African worldview.<sup>66</sup> Westerlund therefore agrees with Susan Reynolds Whyte’s critique that anthropologists have engaged in ‘the medicalization of African religion’.<sup>67</sup> Whyte’s point is that anthropologists have substituted a western medical explanation for the physico-spiritual explanations of traditional religions. In doing so, they assume a position of cultural superiority that undermines their ability to consider African beliefs and practices on their own terms. Westerlund agrees with Whyte that

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<sup>64</sup> Okot p’Bitek and many later social anthropologists objected to Mbiti’s work on similar grounds of over-generalization. See Okot p’Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1970). We will consider p’Bitek’s own work in Chapter Three.

<sup>65</sup> Shorter, ‘Recent Developments’, 536.

<sup>66</sup> David Westerlund, *African Indigenous Religions and Disease Causation* (Leiden, Brill, 2006), 208.

<sup>67</sup> Westerlund, *African Indigenous Religions and Disease Causation*, 4. See Susan Reynolds Whyte, Susan Reynolds, ‘Anthropological Approaches to African Misfortune: From Religion to Medicine’, in *Culture, Experience and Pluralism: Essays on African Ideas of Illness and Healing*, ed. Anita Jacobson-Widding and David Westerlund, (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis, 1989), 289-301.

this a weakness in the anthropological study of African religion. Like Shorter's, his critique is largely a cautionary one.

#### **4. THE AKAN COSMOS EMERGING FROM THE SINGLE-TIERED UNITIVE PERSPECTIVE**

The next step in our analysis is to recognize that a particular Akan cosmology has emerged out of the single-tiered unitive perspective and the interpretive horizon that results. In addition to the primal substructure shared by Akan traditional religion and the perspectives underlying the Old and New Testaments, we will begin to see significant differences between the Akan and biblical thought systems. The critical question thus becomes what to keep and what to reject as the gospel 'converts' the Akan religio-culture.

A diagram of the Akan perception of the world would reveal that the single-tiered unitive perspective is foundational. Emerging from this base is a cosmology made up of a Supreme God, deities, spirits, ancestors, people, animals, and inanimate objects. One way of understanding the work of Bediako and Walls is to look at both African Traditional religions and African Christianity as religious expressions of this single-tiered world. Some of the elements are named differently but all (or most) of them appear in some way in both expressions. However, neither Christianity nor Africa's traditional religions are static. Instead, they are active and dynamic, constantly responding to changes in circumstances. Amid this dynamism, one constant is the single-tiered unitive perspective, a shared perception of reality that refuses to separate 'the animate from the inanimate, the physical from the metaphysical, the sacred from the secular, the natural from the supernatural'.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Dickson, *Theology in Africa*, 49.

The point is that a rational and coherent Akan world has emerged from the single-tiered ontology in which the material/natural and spiritual/supernatural permeate one another and call for an approach to life that includes both and neglects neither. We thus recognize the accuracy of Busia's assertion that the Akan world-view and its understanding of the natural and supernatural 'form a system that gives meaning to men's lives and actions'.<sup>69</sup>

#### 4.1 The First Generation

J. B. Danquah did ground-breaking work in this area of depicting Akan cosmology when, in 1944, he published *The Akan Doctrine of God*.<sup>70</sup> In that work, however, he mentioned his own indebtedness to works by three men: R. S. Rattray's 1923 book, *Ashanti*;<sup>71</sup> Dietrich Westermann's 1937 collection of lectures, *Africa and Christianity*;<sup>72</sup> and Johann Christaller's late nineteenth-century linguistic work.<sup>73</sup> Danquah's book remains a milestone—Harry Sawyerr, for example, based his discussion of the Akan understanding of God on Danquah.<sup>74</sup> Also worthy of mention is Sidney George

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<sup>69</sup> Busia, 'African World View', 3.

<sup>70</sup> J. B. Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God: A Fragment of Gold Coast Ethics and Religion* (London: Lutterworth, 1944).

<sup>71</sup> R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1923). Interestingly, in one of the first published histories of the Asante, Carl Christian Reindorf wrote that no native speaker would ever use 'Ashanti' for Asante. Nonetheless, one encounters both spellings in the literature. Carl Christian Reindorf, *History of the Gold Coast and Asante: Based on Traditions and Historical Facts, Comprising a Period of More than Three Centuries from about 1500 to 1860*, 2nd ed. (Basel: Basel Mission, 1889).

<sup>72</sup> Dietrich Westermann, *Africa and Christianity* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937).

<sup>73</sup> Johann Gottlieb Christaller, *A Grammar of the Asante and Fante Language Called Tshi (Twi, Chee), based on the Akuapem Dialect with Reference to Other (Akan and Fante) Dialects* (Basel: Trübner, 1875); *Twi Mmeseem Mpensa-Ahansia Mmoano: A Collection of Three Thousand and Six Hundred Tshi Proverbs in Use among the Negroes of the Gold Coast Speaking the Asante and Fante Language* (Basel: Basel German Evangelical Missionary Society, 1879); *A Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language Called Tshi (Twi, Chee), with a Grammatical Introduction and Appendices on the Geography of the Gold Coast and Other Subjects* (Basel: Basel Evangelical Missionary Society, 1881).

<sup>74</sup> Harry Sawyerr, *God: Ancestor or Creator?* (London: Longman Group, 1970).



Williamson's work on Akan religion, which draws on both Danquah and Rattray.<sup>75</sup>

Later scholars writing on the Akan cosmology are invariably indebted to the work of these pioneers—Busia, for example, builds on their work even as he brings his own training in social anthropology to his analysis,<sup>76</sup> while John Pobee and Kwame Bediako both owe a great deal to the ground-breaking work of Danquah and his sources.<sup>77</sup>

## 4.2 Overview: Supreme God, Spirits, Deities and Ancestors

For our purposes, John Pobee's summary will be sufficient to demonstrate how the Akan cosmology emerged from the unitive perspective of the single-tiered interpretive horizon. The fact that Kwame Bediako used Pobee's *Toward an African Theology* in his own discussion of the Akan cosmos indicates that he agreed with Pobee's description.<sup>78</sup> Further, the structure Pobee sets out generally represents the structure found in other literature that discusses Akan cosmology—despite variations of nuance and emphasis, the basic structure remains the same. This is not surprising when we remember that this is a picture of the cosmos emerging from a shared understanding of reality.

Pobee writes that the Akan believe in the existence of one supreme God, *Onyame*, *Onyankopon*, or *Nyame*, who is the 'Creator and Sustainer of the universe, the final

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<sup>75</sup> Williamson, *Akan Religion and the Christian Faith*; Danquah, *Akan Doctrine of God*; Rattray, *Ashanti*; R. S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (London: Oxford University Press, 1927).

<sup>76</sup> See Busia's contributions to *Christianity and African Culture*: 'African World View', 1–6; and 'Ancestor Worship, Libation, Stools, Festival', 17–23. Busia's Oxford dissertation was later published as *The Position of the Chief in the Modern Political System of Ashanti* (London: Oxford University Press, 1951).

<sup>77</sup> Other notable works in this area include: Emmanuel Kingsley Larbi, *Pentecostalism: The Eddies of Ghanaian Christianity* (Accra: Blessed, 2001), and 'The Nature of Continuity and Discontinuity of Ghanaian Pentecostal Concept of Salvation in African Cosmology', *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 5, no. 1, (2002): 99–119; Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion* (Accra: FEP International, 1987); T. N. O. Quarcoopome, *West African Traditional Religion* (Ibadan: African University Press, 1987); Clifton Clark, *African Christology: Jesus in Post-Missionary African Christianity* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2011); and Charles Aye Addo, *Akan Christology* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2013).

<sup>78</sup> John S. Pobee, *Toward an African Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979); Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience* (Oxford: Regnum, 2000), 22–23, and *Jesus in African Culture (A Ghanaian Perspective)* (Accra: Asempa, 1990).

authority and Overlord of society who has power of life and death'.<sup>79</sup> After *Onyame* come the *abosom* (deities or gods) and the *mpanyinfo* (ancestors), two groups who have been given intermediary powers because *Onyame* himself is too great to be approached directly.<sup>80</sup> Pobee also points out that nature is understood to have power and held in reverence, because elements in the natural world (rocks, mountains, rivers, lakes, trees, and so on) are regarded as habitations of the deities, making it wise to pour out libations before them.<sup>81</sup>

Busia describes both the Supreme God and the lesser deities as 'charged with power'.<sup>82</sup> The lesser deities in particular may use that power either to help or to hurt the living. Busia notes that the personalities, values, attitudes and thoughts of the *abosom* reflect those of the living; for example, it is the *abosom* who take note of people's actions and are offended if people do not give them the respect and attention they deserve. The *abosom* also punish those who 'depart from the established rules of the society', and 'may bring misfortune, disease, or even death'. Even though they are guardians of morality, however, the *abosom* themselves 'are not invariably good'. They can be moody, destructive, and whimsical in their actions. As Busia concludes, 'the gods ... give promises, they make demands, they issue threats. They show anger as well as pleasure, they listen to prayers, they accept or reject sacrifices, [and] they institute rites in which the worshippers join'.<sup>83</sup> In general, people are careful to honour the

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<sup>79</sup> Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 46.

<sup>80</sup> For an excellent discussion of the intermediary role of the *abosom*, see Ernestina Afriyie, 'Abosom (*Onyame mma* – Children of God) and Jesus Christ (the Son of God): An Engagement of the Intermediary Role of *Abosom* in Akan Religion with that of Jesus Christ in the Christian Faith', in *Seeing New Facets of the Diamond: Christianity as a Universal Faith – Essays in Honour of Kwame Bediako*, ed. Gillian Mary Bediako, Benhardt Y. Quarshie, and J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu (Oxford: Regnum, 2014), 261–68.

<sup>81</sup> Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 46–48.

<sup>82</sup> Busia, 'African World View', 3–4.

<sup>83</sup> Busia, 'African World View', 3–4.

*abosom* due to their ability to cause crops to grow and increase the fertility of soil, livestock, and human families. E. K. Larbi makes the point, however, that if the deities disappoint, they disappear—something that does not happen to either *Onyankopon* or the ancestors.

Busia notes that there is some overlap in function between ancestors and the *abosom*. Ancestors, too, are keepers of the moral standards of the community, and may bless or withhold blessing from their living family members.<sup>84</sup> According to Pobee, ancestors ‘are believed to be powerful in the sense that they maintain the course of life here and now and do influence it for good or for ill. They give children to the living; they give good harvest; they provide the sanctions for the moral life of the nation and accordingly punish, exonerate, or reward the living as the case may be.’<sup>85</sup> (It is thus unsurprising that only deceased individuals who lived long and exemplary lives achieve the status of ‘ancestors’.<sup>86</sup>) In general, ancestors clearly function as intermediaries. Busia quotes a prayer made to the ancestors during an *adae* festival to demonstrate how ancestors have power to (1) make the tribe prosper, (2) help women bear children, (3) help people make money, and (4) bring long life to the tribe.

Today is Adae;  
Come and receive this and eat;  
Let the tribe prosper;  
Let those of child-bearing age bear children;  
May all the people get money;  
Long life to us all;

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<sup>84</sup> E. K. Larbi also ascribes this function to *Asase Yaa*, the earth goddess who is also the ‘custodian of morality and social decorum, the traditional ethical code’. C. C. Okorochoa, *The Meaning of Religious Conversion in Africa: The Case of the Igbo of Nigeria* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1987), 101; quoted in Emmanuel Kingsley Larbi, *Pentecostalism: the Eddies of Ghanaian Christianity* (Accra: Blessed, 2001), 4.

<sup>85</sup> Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 46.

<sup>86</sup> We will explore the Akan understanding of ancestors in much greater depth in Chapter Four, which focuses on Akan Christology.

Long life to the tribe.<sup>87</sup>

Kwame Bediako essentially adopts Pobee's description of this spirit world, agreeing with Pobee that, in practice, the ancestors tend to rank above the *abosom*.<sup>88</sup> Likewise, according to both Pobee and Bediako, while deities may be scorned if they do not do what they are entreated to do, this never happens to the ancestors. Bediako adds, however, that when the ancestors are no longer remembered by the community, they enter the spirit world.<sup>89</sup>

I would argue that the importance of ancestors as intermediaries in the Akan cosmos—a cosmos that, as Larbi describes it, is composed of 'two inter-penetrating and inseparable, yet distinguishable, parts, namely, the world of spirits and the world of man'<sup>90</sup>—emerges directly from the need to navigate between these two worlds. In a cosmos in which both material and spiritual cause and effect operate to produce or preclude a successful life, ancestors and the cultic practices surrounding them are absolutely necessary. Especially where *Onyame* is beyond the reach of mere mortals, trustworthy intermediaries who are less capricious than the *abosom* must logically rise to the level observed by Pobee, Bediako, and others. Ancestors may rank below the

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<sup>87</sup> K. A. Busia, 'Ancestor Worship, Libation, Stools, Festival', in *Christianity and African Culture*, 20–21.

<sup>88</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture*. Bediako uses Pobee's *Toward an African Theology*, especially Chapter Three: 'African World View'.

<sup>89</sup> Clifton Clarke adds additional information when he explains that, among traditional Akan, there is great uncertainty about what happens to a person's spirit at death. 'The spirits are classified in three groups: *osaman-pa*, the good spirit, who behaved responsibly on earth and reached the full allocation of years therefore promoted to the realm of the spirit—ancestors; *otofo* one killed in battle or through an accident—he is honoured because his end was not his own fault; then *osaman-twentwen* (a hovering about spirit)—which remains on earth for a period of time, for reasons not quite clear. ... The world of the *asamanfo* (departed spirits) is not *Onyankopon*'s place of abode, but a special place, under the earth called the *asaman*. At death *Onyankopon* decides whether a person shall go directly to the place of the dead, or continue for a while to haunt his earthly habitation (probably because, as in the case of one who dies through an accident, 'destiny' has not yet been fulfilled).' Clifton R. Clarke, 'Towards a Functional Christology Among AICs in Ghana', *Mission Studies* 22, no. 2 (2005): 305, f.n. 12, 14.

<sup>90</sup> Larbi, *Pentecostalism*, 4.

*abosom* ontologically, but their help is more often sought because they are regarded as more trustworthy and closer to the human experience (and hence never worshipped).

In one of his essays, Busia recounts a Mende chief's explanation of why people pray to the ancestors: 'If you are seeking a favour from a chief, you don't go to him yourself; you start by asking someone near him to speak on your behalf.'<sup>91</sup> Where life is precarious and power over spirits and physical dangers are signally important for survival in the here and now, the ancestors become go-betweens, able to cross the permeable membrane separating the world of the living from the world of the living-dead, the spirits, and the Supreme God. The ancestors bring the human dimension into their work which is then critical in their ability to intercede with the Supreme God on behalf of the community.. In this connection, Williamson notes that the ancestors (known in Twi as *asaman/asamanfo*) live in a special place under the earth called the *asaman*, and have access to *Onyankopon* because they are closer to his abode than are the living.<sup>92</sup> In other words, they are in the place of access so needed by the community.

One of the great challenges for Christian theologians working out of the Akan unitive perspective is how to articulate an understanding of the gospel that both reflects and incorporates this interpretive horizon. What they cannot do is discard the overall picture of a single, unified cosmos made up of two permeable, co-equal spheres of influence and inhabited by a Supreme God, deities, ancestors, and people. As African Christians began to consider the world of the Bible, however, they discovered support

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<sup>91</sup> Busia, 'Ancestor Worship, Libation, Stools, Festival', 20.

<sup>92</sup> This is confirmed by Busia: 'Life in the land of the dead to which the dead go seems similar in many respects to life in this world. The relationship between the living and the dead is kept alive by regular sacrificial rites. The members of a household, sons, grandsons, nephews on both sides of the family form a cult group. They usually have their own place of worship, a place in the bush at the foot of a silk cotton tree. There the members of the household meet to make their offering of the bowl of fowl and rice to their ancestors. ... The ancestors in the land of the dead are nearer the Creator, who is too big to be directly approached. The ancestors are nearer, and more immediately able to give assistance.' Busia, 'Ancestor Worship, Libation, Stools, Festival', 19–20. Cf. Williamson, *Akan Religion and the Christian Faith*, 92–93; Obeng, *Asante Catholicism*, 92.

for that picture, if not for every detail within it. This inspired tremendous confidence that they had something important to contribute to the global theological conversation. Indeed, Akan Christians have discovered categories that were either suppressed or non-existent in the West. Using living categories found in both Scripture and their own backgrounds, they began to use these categories to understand the gospel in ways missionaries and the churches founded by missionaries could not easily replicate.

Nonetheless, tensions arose between biblical expectations and some areas of Akan belief and tradition. The Old Testament's many polemics against idolatry posed a challenge to Akan Christians as they considered the use of totems, pouring of libations, and other traditional practices. We might say they faced the danger of collapsing the biblical and primal interpretive horizons as though they were one and the same. We will examine this danger in greater detail in Chapter Four's discussion of 'analogical continuity', an approach that allows for similarities between these two interpretive horizons while suggesting that direct continuities are rare. The underlying single-tiered perspective, however, establishes the possibility of 'landing places' and 'bridges' for biblical truths to find a home within the Akan world.

In what remains of this chapter, I will use the lens of the single-tiered unitive perspective to analyse the work of two scholars, Christian G. Baeta and Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu. Though they wrote some forty years apart, both produced research that demonstrates the key role of the single-tiered perspective in African life, using it to explain both the rise of the 'spiritual churches' and the recent 'encroachment' of religion into Ghana's public square. The ongoing importance of the single-tiered perspective also forms a link between the two studies. The 'spiritual churches' studied by Baeta were among the first in Africa to take seriously the single-tiered understanding of material and spiritual causes and effects. Decades later, the prophetic and healing work of the African Initiated Churches has been substantially taken over and

incorporated into the Pentecostal Charismatic churches of contemporary Ghana—churches that, as Asamoah-Gyadu points out, came to wield so much influence that the national airline enlisted the help of an evangelist to ‘heal’ the company.

## 5. C. G. BAETA’S STUDY OF THE SPIRITUAL CHURCHES

In their introduction to *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience*, a collection of Kwame Bediako’s most important writings, Hans Visser and Gillian Bediako take up a question from John Taylor’s *The Primal Vision*: ‘if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions that Africans are asking, what would he look like?’ This question, they suggest, was the focus of Kwame Bediako’s ‘scholarly and pastoral ministry’.<sup>93</sup>

Nearly forty years earlier, C. G. Baeta had already begun addressing Taylor’s question in his 1962 book, *Prophetism in Ghana: A Study of Some ‘Spiritual’ Churches*. In his study of nine different ‘Spiritual’ churches,<sup>94</sup> he agreed with Bengt Sundkler’s observation that these churches provided a picture of what life in the church would look like if the ‘African Christian, *when left to himself*’ were to design a church based on what he ‘regarded as important and relevant in Christian faith and in the Christian church’.<sup>95</sup> Baeta also quotes E. W. Smith, who commented that the success of the

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<sup>93</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, i. The full quote is: ‘Christ has been presented as the answer to the questions a white man would ask, the solution to the needs that Western man would feel, the Saviour of the world of the European world-view, the object of the adoration and prayer of historic Christendom. But if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions that Africans are asking, what would he look like? If he came into the world of African cosmology to redeem Man as Africans understand him, would he be recognizable to the rest of the Church Universal? And if Africa offered him the praises and petitions of her total, uninhibited humanity, would they be acceptable?’ Taylor, *Primal Vision*, 7.

<sup>94</sup> While Baeta looked at nine large and influential churches, Kofi Asare Opoku listed 213 ‘Spiritual Churches’, some of which were very small. See Kofi Asare Opoku, ‘A Directory of “Spiritual Churches” in Ghana’, in the African e-Journals Project of Michigan State University Libraries, accessed April 6, 2016, <http://pdfproc.lib.msu.edu/?file=/DMC/African%20Journals/pdfs/Institute%20of%20African%20Studies%20Research%20Review/1970v7n1/asrv007001008.pdf>.

<sup>95</sup> Christian G. Baeta, *Prophetism in Ghana: A Study of Some ‘Spiritual’ Churches* (London: SCM, 1962), 2; italics in the original.

‘Spiritual’ churches ‘is due in no small measure’ to their nearness to the ‘African ethos whereas the churches of European origin are often so distressingly European and dull’.<sup>96</sup> While Smith’s observation is admittedly superficial, focused as it is primarily on forms of worship and the use of African music and instruments, he at least appreciates the uniquely African origin of these churches as a key to their strength and success.

Baeta gives us some of the first observations of African Initiated Churches by a researcher who, like so many other pioneering African scholars, was trained in the West.<sup>97</sup> His study of the African-initiated ‘Spiritual’ churches not only established that these churches were worthy of scholarly study, but also prepared the way for later research that took seriously the contributions of African Christians who were already responding to Taylor’s question.

The single-tiered unitive perspective is never far from the surface of Baeta’s study, and its presence brings coherence to what he describes. Baeta begins his study by distinguishing between ‘messianism’ and ‘prophetism’. Messianism, he argues, grows out of intolerable political conditions and the promise of an imminent saviour who is very often associated with nationalism. Prophetism may contain some of the same elements, but it is much more. Prophetism ‘arises from the dream or vision of a prophet ... not necessarily ... related to prevailing external conditions. It may be (and often is) entirely a matter of personal inward, usually religious, experience or development.’<sup>98</sup> In other words, from the outset of his study Baeta distinguishes between one movement rooted primarily in the material and another rooted in both the natural and the

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<sup>96</sup> Baeta, *Prophetism in Ghana*, 2.

<sup>97</sup> Baeta studied at the Scottish Mission Teacher Training College in Akropong, Ghana, the Evangelical Mission Seminary of Basel, and King’s College London, where he wrote his doctoral thesis on prophetism in Ghana.

<sup>98</sup> Baeta, *Prophetism in Ghana*, 4.



supernatural. We see this even more clearly when Baeta describes the prophet as one ‘endowed with a striking personality ... believing himself, and believed by others to be a special agent of some supernatural being or force’.<sup>99</sup> This power is demonstrated by the prophet’s ability to heal, reveal hidden things, predict the future, and effectually bless or curse.

Baeta uses this rubric to discuss men such as Prophet Harris, whose 1914 mission to Ghana resulted in the formation of The Church of the Twelve Apostles. In this church, Baeta observes, worship is focused almost exclusively on healing. There is little preaching, doctrine holds little importance, and while Bibles are present, they are used almost as instruments for healing, similar to gourd rattles. The church’s emphasis, Baeta reports, is laid, ‘to the total exclusion of all other matters, upon the activity of the Holy Spirit in enabling certain men and women to predict future events, warn of impending misfortunes, detect evil-doers and, above all, to cure illnesses’. Asked what the Church of the Twelve Apostles stood for, its leader did not hesitate to explain: ‘We are here to heal.’<sup>100</sup> Baeta records a similar response from the catechist at an evening prayer service held by the Musama Disco Christo Church, who stated, ‘We are all in this Church because we have found healing here. But for this Church the great majority of us here assembled would not be alive today’. Asked if they agreed with the catechist, the congregation answered with ‘a unanimous and most decided “Yes!”’<sup>101</sup>

Baeta takes note of two churches that grew out of the Presbyterian Church in Ghana: the Apostolowo Fe Dedefia Habobo (The Apostolic Revelation Society) and the Etodome Nyanyuie-Presbiteria Hame Gbedoda Kple Doyo-Habobo (The Prayer and

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<sup>99</sup> Baeta, *Prophetism in Ghana*, 6–7.

<sup>100</sup> Baeta, *Prophetism in Ghana*, 15.

<sup>101</sup> Baeta, *Prophetism in Ghana*, 54.

Healing Group of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church at Etodome). The first, founded by Mr. Charles Kobla Nutonuti Woveni, or Prophet Woveni, left the Presbyterians over the issue of prayer for healing, which the leaders of the Presbyterian Church wanted to stop. This particular church, Baeta notes, is not highly emotional, and its members claim their doctrine is the same as that of the Presbyterians. Unlike members of the Church of the Twelve Apostles, they value education very highly, even running their own seminary.<sup>102</sup> The Prayer and Healing Group of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church at Etodome, on the other hand, was founded by Frank Kwadzo Do, a former mason who came to the ministry through a series of visions he experienced after healing a young child who died, or was close to death, during a worship service he was leading on the veranda of a house.<sup>103</sup>

Baeta notes how the Bible gains revelatory authority in Spiritual churches not only as God's written word but also through its association with healing, prophecy, and—in the case of the Musama Disco Christo Church—by a direct word from God. Joseph William Egyanka Appiah, the founder of this church, was strongly influenced by the Methodist Church healer Samuel Nyankson and the prophetess Hannah Barnes (née Abena Baawa), whom Appiah took as his second wife.<sup>104</sup> Appiah then taught his church that both the Old and New Testaments had equal authority, as proclaimed in a direct revelation from God, who said to him: 'Why do some of my messengers believe in the Old Covenant and not in the New? Why do some believe in the New but not in the Old? I am the same god who speaks in the Old Testament as in the new.' The Musama Disco

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<sup>102</sup> Baeta, *Prophetism in Ghana*, 76-93.

<sup>103</sup> Baeta, *Prophetism in Ghana*, 94-112.

<sup>104</sup> Baeta, *Prophetism in Ghana*, 28-67.

Christo Church went on to use the Bible to justify ‘the Ark, sacrifices, polygamy, Levitical rules of purification, [and] statements about angels and demons’.<sup>105</sup>

It is important not to miss the ways in which Appiah’s method of leadership reflects his deep rootedness in the single-tiered perspective. Appiah surrounded himself with healers, prophets, and prophetesses, and articulated what he himself heard from God. Where the careful doctrinal formulations of the mission-founded churches appealed to westerners, they left many Africans cold. For people accustomed to a permeable reality that includes both the material and the spiritual, it was Appiah’s ability to say quite directly, ‘Thus sayeth the Lord’, that caught their attention. Appiah’s preaching satisfied their need for both spiritual and intellectual credibility rooted in an approach that fully embraced their need for power in a unified, single-tiered world. Further, if healings had not taken place in the church, people would have left. In these examples, we can see what Walls described as ‘that busy, constantly crossed, frontier of the phenomenal and transcendent worlds’.<sup>106</sup> Without the ability to cross over that frontier, Appiah would not have succeeded.

Baeta places his study of the ‘Spiritual’ churches in the context of the hardness of life at that time for the people of Ghana, who he described as ‘chronically conscious of enfeeblement, of some ill-defined but vicious anaemia making the blood pulse less vigorously than it ought, and man’s total powers just miss their grasp of full vitality’. Under these conditions, and facing other problems related to a harsh climate, malnutrition, diseases due to worms, insects, microbes, and endemic malaria—all of which lead to a general ‘awareness of debility’—one ‘constantly yearns and gropes for

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<sup>105</sup> Baeta, *Prophetism in Ghana*, 43.

<sup>106</sup> Andrew Walls, *Christianity in Africa in the 1990s*, ed. Christopher Fyfe and Andrew F. Walls (Edinburgh: Centre of African Studies, 1996), 8.

health and fitness’.<sup>107</sup> Yet Baeta points out that, as real and present as these physical causes are, ‘spiritual agencies’ affecting human wellbeing are just as real and just as present. Where traditional religion sought ‘to obtain, preserve and increase what has been called “life-force”: potency, vitality, elan; more vigorous, pulsating, prolific life ... it cannot be surprising that the healing art should be set squarely within the religious context, or that the fundamental quest of religion itself should be this selfsame “life-force”’.<sup>108</sup>

The primal world demanded that people ‘concern themselves with the various divinities, semi-deified ancestors, spirits, demons, witches, fetishes, charms and spells’ of traditional religion if they were to succeed in acquiring what Baeta calls the ‘life-force’. The spiritual churches could not simply ignore these spiritual, supernatural resources, but had to demonstrate instead that the power of the gospel could achieve better results than those promised by traditional practitioners. As Baeta writes, ‘the “spiritual churches” represent a turning away from these traditional resources of supernatural succour in order that help may be sought, for the same purposes, from the God proclaimed in the Christian evangel’.<sup>109</sup>

Employing our analytical tool of the single-tiered perspective, Baeta’s concluding sentence stands out: ‘Thus I see [the spiritual churches] as engaged in a prodigious struggle to prove the reality of spiritual things in general and of the biblical promises in particular, taking these in a fully literal sense.’<sup>110</sup> The maps cohere because they both emerge from a robust view of a world in which the material and spiritual, the natural and supernatural, interpenetrate. As Baeta points out in his Conclusion, spiritual

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<sup>107</sup> Baeta, *Prophetism in Ghana*, 134.

<sup>108</sup> Baeta, *Prophetism in Ghana*, 134.

<sup>109</sup> Baeta, *Prophetism in Ghana*, 134.

<sup>110</sup> Baeta, *Prophetism in Ghana*, 134–35.

churches often quote a passage like Mk 9.23—'If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth'—with special emphasis on 'all things', criticizing historical churches for neglecting this great work of God due to their gross unbelief.<sup>111</sup> At the same time, members of spiritual churches are likely to point to 1 Thes 1.9 ('you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God') and the commandment to 'have no other gods' as their reason for complete separation from African traditional religions. This does not mean, however, that they do not cultivate 'spiritual exercises' to manipulate the supernatural in a way that parallels the practices of traditional healers, diviners, and fortune tellers. As a result, they scour the Scriptures for instruction and ideas—oil, prayer, laying on of hands, handkerchiefs and napkins, and water. As these don't always work, they are constantly on the look-out for new techniques: 'There is practically always something new being introduced: some new fast, or taboo, or rite, or time and manner of praying, or dress, or (in Musama Disco Christo phraseology) "system". The search goes on.'<sup>112</sup>

## **6. KWABENA ASAMOAH-GYADU'S EXAMINATION OF THE GHANA AIRWAYS PRAYER VIGIL**

In 2003 a series of accidents befell Ghana Airways. To remedy the problem, officials of the airline called in someone with the requisite 'anointing' to 'heal' the airline: the evangelist Dr. Lawrence Tetteh. In an article published in the February 2005 issue of the *Journal of Religion in Africa*,<sup>113</sup> Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu uses this incident to examine 'the encroachment of religion upon public space in contemporary Africa'.<sup>114</sup> In

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<sup>111</sup> Baeta, *Prophetism in Ghana*, 128-147. The biblical quotations are from the King James Version as Baeta quotes them.

<sup>112</sup> Baeta, *Prophetism in Ghana*, 140.

<sup>113</sup> Asamoah-Gyadu, 'Christ Is the Answer', 93-117.

<sup>114</sup> Asamoah-Gyadu, 'Christ Is the Answer', 93.

particular, he shows how ‘the Pentecostal “healing and deliverance” ministry has become popular in African contexts like that of Ghana because it takes African worldviews of mystical causality seriously’.<sup>115</sup> Further, he argues that there has been a reduction in the dichotomy between sacred and secular institutions, allowing the mind-set of one to be appropriated by the other—especially the religious mind-set by the secular.

We should note two things at the start. First, what Baeta noted in his study of the ‘spiritual churches’—the desire to work out life’s issues using an approach that includes both spiritual and material cause and effect—continues unabated some forty years on. Second, the interpretive horizon emerging from the single-tiered unitive perspective has now become the mainstream understanding of the church in Ghana. While there are significant differences between the AICs and the more recent Pentecostal and Charismatic churches—which have in turn affected virtually all of the historic mission-founded churches—both approaches emerge from the need to take seriously the single-tiered understanding of reality.<sup>116</sup> Asamoah-Gyadu demonstrates that the understanding of life as ruled by both ‘mystical causality’ and natural causality continues in the face of modernity, which came to Ghana first through the missionaries and then more recently through technology as it has influenced education, business, medicine and science,. In other words, modernity has not replaced the unitive perspective.<sup>117</sup> As Asamoah-Gyadu writes, ‘In the face of modernization, development and globalization, the African

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<sup>115</sup> Asamoah-Gyadu, ‘Christ Is the Answer’, 93.

<sup>116</sup> See Cephas Omenyo, ‘New Wine in an Old Wine Bottle? Charismatic Healing in the Mainline Churches in Ghana’, *Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Healing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 232.

<sup>117</sup> It might be argued that post-modernity at least opens the way for the Akan single-tiered understanding of reality to be recognized and taken seriously. As discussed in Chapter One, this is reflected in the fact that many social scientists are quite critical of their predecessors, whose blinders kept them from ‘seeing’ what they were studying.

universe still remains a sacramental one ... The physical thus acts as a vehicle for developments in the supernatural realm, a worldview that we constantly see being played out in African public space.<sup>118</sup>

Like Baeta, Asamoah-Gyadu highlights the role of prophets, making the point that they are ultimately proved by their success. He notes, however, that this role is now being taken over by Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, which have incorporated the prophetic role within their own structures—a practice that is ‘underpinned by the African belief in mystical causality’.<sup>119</sup> Further, he points to the healing and deliverance beliefs and practices of the Pentecostal/Charismatic churches, which are being used to intervene in all facets of African life not only to heal but to ensure prosperity. Indeed, he argues that these kinds of ministries, utilized by governments and businesses, have become a kind of sub-culture to be called upon in times of need. It is here he sees the ‘encroachment’ of religion on ‘public space’.<sup>120</sup> The situation with Ghana Airways is a case in point.

To restore public confidence in the airline, Ghana Airways needed to address their problems in a three-fold manner. First, no matter what material causes may have contributed to the airline’s difficulties, the company had to engage on the spiritual or ‘mystical causal’ level. Second, they had to discover the human agents of the supernatural powers causing the airline’s decline. Third, people at the airline had to assume responsibility for disarming the spiritual forces at work. This latter point demonstrates that in the Ghanaian context ‘health and wellbeing are both personal and communal. Anybody who does not work towards the total wellbeing of the community

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<sup>118</sup> Asamoah-Gyadu, ‘Christ Is the Answer’, 95.

<sup>119</sup> Asamoah-Gyadu, ‘Christ Is the Answer’, 96.

<sup>120</sup> Asamoah-Gyadu, ‘Christ Is the Answer’, 8.

could therefore be what the Akan of Ghana describe as *abonsam*, devil.<sup>121</sup> By the use of ‘prophetic prayer’, the anointed leader, Dr. Tetteh, was believed to be able to disengage people from the power of the demons and disarm them in their battle with Christians, their businesses, and families.<sup>122</sup>

Based on the Ghana Airways situation and the role of religion in African public life, Asamoah-Gyadu notes three particular roles for religion. First, religion serves as a survival strategy in Africa. Whatever other causes of difficulty might exist, people understand themselves to be living in a ‘sacramental universe’ and therefore want to cover all their bases, using religion accordingly. The West’s assumption that secularization naturally follows the introduction of modernity falters at precisely this point. The single-tiered perspective, from the African point of view, already offers a sufficiently robust and satisfyingly holistic explanation for reality. Second, the inseparability of the natural and supernatural is dominant in popular religion because, for Christian believers in Ghana, religion is most useful as it confronts the every-day problems they face. While modernity has reduced the explanatory significance of God in the West, it has not done so in Africa. Third, Africans understand the distinction between natural and supernatural causality, but they also accept the necessity of both. There is a both/and world. Asamoah-Gyadu recognizes that there is a potential danger—namely, that demons are given credit for problems resulting from human irresponsibility. He argues that it is proper to take the supernatural into account, but not ‘always’, especially when the immediate causes are natural and clear to be seen. Ghana Airways can certainly pray, but it should also put effective maintenance procedures in place. He concludes:

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<sup>121</sup> Asamoah-Gyadu, ‘Christ Is the Answer’, 103.

<sup>122</sup> Asamoah-Gyadu, ‘Christ Is the Answer’, 104.



The belief in a sacramental universe means that in dealing with personal or public decisions on life, economics, health or politics, religion may be employed in Africa for purposes expressed by Robin Horton as: ‘explanation, prediction, and control’. In traditional Africa, as we have noted, prayer, sacrifice and offerings, in fact religious ritual in general, often aims to achieve the practical ends of success, prosperity and general wellbeing.<sup>123</sup>

## 7. CONCLUSION

The various descriptions of the single-tiered unitive perspective explored in this chapter all serve to demonstrate the potential importance of this tool in facilitating further analysis of the foundations of African Christian theology. At the same time, the differences in terminology used by various scholars reflect nuanced differences in how the single-tiered perspective is understood and employed.

Some scholars, such as Asamoah and Gyekye, push for the acceptance of the single-tiered perspective as a uniquely accurate understanding of the ontological structure of reality. In their view, the West is deficient in its understanding of reality, and Africa can help it broaden its ontological horizons. Asamoah’s insistence on holding together metaphysics and epistemology is an early and important contribution by an African scholar to the global Christian theological conversation.<sup>124</sup> Kwame Gyekye’s discussion of epistemology and the Akan use of paranormal cognition argues strongly for a way of knowing that is essentially foreign to the West.<sup>125</sup> John Mbiti’s explicit use of the word ‘ontology’ to identify the unified perspective that holds together the natural and supernatural in the African worldview certainly aligns him with Asamoah and Gyekye.<sup>126</sup> A question not explored here, but which might warrant further investigation,

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<sup>123</sup> Asamoah-Gyadu, ‘Christ Is the Answer’, 114.

<sup>124</sup> Asamoah, ‘Influence of Fetishism’, 29–45.

<sup>125</sup> Gyekye, *African Philosophical Thought*.

<sup>126</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*.

is why Mbiti chose to use a word with such a long history in the western philosophical tradition to describe the African worldview. Does Mbiti's use of the term 'ontology' pose an implied challenge to the hegemonic West and its philosophic tradition?

Other scholars are less overtly insistent on the superiority of the single-tiered perspective. Busia and Dickson, for example, emphasize the significance of the unified perspective, but do so in order to demonstrate the coherence of life in the Ashanti world—a world they believe stands up well to the counter claims of the West.<sup>127</sup>

Dickson, an Old Testament scholar, used the phrase 'living universe' to draw attention to the robust interaction between natural and supernatural elements that is the opposite of Weber's disenchanted West. Bediako, Asamoah-Gyadu, and Frank Kwesi Adams adopt Harold Turner's use of the term 'sacramental universe' to offer the possibility of a re-enchanted world to those who can no longer conceive of such a place,<sup>128</sup> but they also caution against over-interpretation of spiritual activity that might encourage human irresponsibility.

Pashington Obeng uses the term 'spiritualized social field' to describe the ways in which Asante religio-culture and Roman Catholic belief and practice interact.<sup>129</sup> In so doing, he asserts that Asante Catholic theology is under no obligation to conform to the West's reductionist material understanding of reality. We see here the liberation of African Christian theology rooted in the single-tiered unitive perspective itself. Obeng does recognize, however, that the Roman Catholic Church has, even in its western expressions, retained categories for the 'supernatural' lost to Protestantism. Obeng

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<sup>127</sup> Busia, 'African World View'; Dickson, *Theology in Africa*.

<sup>128</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 95; Asamoah-Gyadu, 'Christ Is the Answer', 93–117; Adams, *Odira and the Gospel*, 5; Turner, 'Primal Religions of the World', 27–37. I will discuss Adams's work in greater detail in Chapter Three. See also Henry Persenaire-Hogeterp, 'Re-enchanting the Universe: The Potency of African Primal Spirituality for the Renewal of Christian Spirituality in the West', *Journal of African Christian Thought* 14, no. 2 (December 2011): 47–56.

<sup>129</sup> Obeng, *Asante Catholicism*.

mentions both the ‘communion of saints’ (which can encompass the ancestors) and ministries of exorcism as cases in point.<sup>130</sup>

A final nuance to note is the way several scholars use the single-tiered structure to resist what they see as a kind of neo-colonialism. Mugambi’s term ‘monist’ to describe Taylor’s understanding of the African ‘physico-spiritual universe’, or David Westerlund’s assessment of the impact of technology in the area of medicine and the greater role now given to human agency in explaining disease, must be qualified by the tendency of western scholars to medicalize African religion. In so doing they impose a western paradigm rooted in their own two-tiered non-unitive perspective. Even those who hesitated in accepting the notion of a basic African world view, like Aylward Shorter, had to allow that African Christian spirituality emerged from a coherent system of its own.

It is worth noting that several scholars have used their discussions of the single-tiered structure—which they regard as a functional and internally-coherent understanding of reality—to resist what they see as a kind of neo-colonialism on the part of western scholars and observers.<sup>131</sup> For example, Mugambi used his introduction to Taylor’s ‘monist’ understanding of the African ‘physico-spiritual universe’ to point out how rarely western missionaries have attempted to truly understand and ‘enter’ an African mind-set or it to critique their own cultural assumptions.<sup>132</sup> The significance of this critique is underlined by the fact that even scholars who have hesitated to accept the idea of a basic African world view have had to reckon with the presence of a particular

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<sup>130</sup> Obeng, *Asante Catholicism*, 225.

<sup>131</sup> David Westerlund points to this type of neo-colonialism in his acknowledgment of western scholars’ tendency to medicalize African religion, thus imposing a western paradigm rooted in their own two-tiered non-unitive perspective. Westerlund, *African Indigenous Religions and Disease Causation*, 4.

<sup>132</sup> Mugambi, introduction to Taylor, xix–xxii.

approach to the world, however they understood it. Aylward Shorter, for instance, was not convinced that Mbiti had proven his case for a widespread African ontology, but had to allow that African Christian spirituality emerged from a coherent system of its own.<sup>133</sup>

All these scholars show us different ways in which theology, worked out within the single-tiered frame of reference offers a significant tool for shaping an Akan iteration of the gospel that is coherent, nuanced, and responsive to the questions Africans ask about Christ. Baeta and Asamoah-Gyadu are two examples of Ghanaian theologians working out of a metaphysically and epistemologically coherent system to produce sophisticated analyses of the gospel's impact on the people of Ghana, as seen in the case studies we have examined.<sup>134</sup>

Bringing the robust single-tiered unitive perspective of the Akan and the two-tiered understanding of the post-Enlightenment West into closer conversation offers the global church two opportunities. First, this conversation challenges the West's tacit reliance on reason alone, which has resulted in over-privileging material cause and effect and produced a serious fact-faith divide. Second, the West's long theological tradition can speak into the thinking of those churches operating out of the single-tiered perspective, asking them to examine with greater care what might, as Asamoah-Gyadu pointed out, be false claims to spiritual activity. This conversation would help to further sharpen the single-tiered unitive perspective as a hermeneutical tool, revealing both its advantages and its limitations. Does this tool, for example, have sufficient analytical precision to identify excesses or distinguish between different 'spirits' as Scripture

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<sup>133</sup> Shorter, 'Recent Developments', 536.

<sup>134</sup> Baeta, *Prophetism in Ghana*; Asamoah-Gyadu, 'Christ Is the Answer'.

requires?<sup>135</sup> The experience of the early church—which encountered similar issues in the cases of the sons of Sceva (Acts 19.11-21) and Simon the sorcerer (Acts 8.4-24)—suggests that this type of tool is not, in isolation, capable of differentiating spiritual counterfeits. In other words, the single-tiered unitive perspective must be used in conjunction with other biblical tools.

In Chapter Three, I will analyse Kwame Bediako's suggestion that identity has become a category, a hermeneutical key, and a new methodology in African theology. This will lead us to further consideration of how Bediako, by taking seriously both natural and supernatural cause and effect, provides categories for doing African Christian theology.

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<sup>135</sup> Deuteronomy 18.22 establishes the criteria for a true prophet. Cf. Is 44.25; Jer 14.14; Lam 2.14; Ez 13.9; Mt. 24.5, 23–26; Lk 21.8; Acts 17.11; 1 Cor 14.29; 1 Thes 5.21; 1 Tm 4.1; 2 Tm 3.13; 2 Pt 2.1; 1 Jn 2.18, 4.1; 2 Jn 7; Rv 2.2.

## Chapter Three

### Identity Rooted in the Single-Tiered Unitive Perspective on Reality

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I will examine Kwame Bediako's idea that 'identity' has come to fulfil a three-fold function as a theological category, methodological approach, and hermeneutical key for rightly interpreting African Christian theologies. I will argue that the fact that this identity is shaped by, and emerges from, the single-tiered unitive perspective sheds light on why Bediako and other African theologians could not be satisfied with merely adapting their African understanding of the Gospel to its western iteration. Bediako argues that Christians in Africa, in spite of their exposure to western education and its two-tiered approach to understanding reality, continued to think and write out of their single-tiered primal understanding of the 'essentially unified and "spiritual" nature' of the world. Consequently,

African Christians have, on the whole, avoided any significant secularisation of their outlook. New knowledge in science and technology has been embraced, but it has not displaced the basic view that the whole universe in which human existence takes place is fundamentally spiritual. ... What the Gospel has done, therefore, is to affirm a spirituality that was there already, even if it has also pruned off some of its features and sharpened its focus, this time, upon Christ.<sup>1</sup>

As I examine Bediako's assertion that 'identity' is now a theological category for African writers, I argue that the single-tiered unitive perspective on reality is critical to Bediako's discussion of identity. Further, Kwesi Dickson's description of Akan 'religio-culture' (outlined in Chapter One) can help us more precisely articulate the role of this perspective in shaping the Akan response to the interpretive landscape in which they

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<sup>1</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 176.

live. Remembering that Akan culture is more properly thought of as religio-culture emphasizes once again that Bediako discusses identity within a frame of reference that is dependent on the interpretive landscape established by the single-tiered unitive perspective and its associated natural-supernatural horizons. As Kwame Bediako is our main conversation partner in this chapter, I will begin with a short biographical sketch.

## 2. A SHORT BIOGRAPHY OF KWAME BEDIAKO

Kwame Bediako was already established as a leading figure and influential voice among African Christian theologians when he died, one month short of his sixty-third birthday, in 2008.<sup>2</sup> Leading Christian scholars in Europe and Africa eulogized Bediako, recounting the importance of his contributions not only to the development of African Christian scholars but also to the global theological mission of the Church. In locating his own theological perspective, Bediako referred to himself as ‘an African evangelical Christian of the twentieth century’.<sup>3</sup>

Manasseh Kwame Dakwa Bediako was born on July 7, 1945.<sup>4</sup> He grew up in Tesano, near Accra, where his father served as a police inspector at the Tesano Police

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<sup>2</sup> See Watson Omulokoli’s assessment of Kwame Bediako’s life and ministry: ‘Kwame Bediako, A Deeply Christian Scholar, and the Implications of his Example’, in *Seeing New Facets of the Diamond: Christianity as a Universal Faith – Essays in Honour of Kwame Bediako*, ed. Gillian Mary Bediako, Benhardt Y. Quarshie, and J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu (Akropong-Akuapem: Regnum Africa, 2014), 81–93. Omulokoli, quoting Andrew Walls, refers to Bediako as the leading African theologian of his generation. For other tributes, see *Call to Glory: Programme for the Burial and Thanksgiving Services for the late Rev. Professor Kwame Bediako* (Akropong: ACI, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience* (Oxford: Regnum, 2000), 34. The following biographical details are taken from four sources: Hans Visser and Gillian Bediako, introduction to *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience*, by Kwame Bediako (Oxford: Regnum, 2000), xi–xvii; Andrew F. Walls, ‘Kwame Bediako and Christian Scholarship in Africa’, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 32, no. 4 (October 2008): 188–93; J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, ‘Bediako of Africa: A Late 20th Century Outstanding Theologian and Teacher’, *Missions Studies* 26 (2009): 5–16; Cephas Omenyo, ‘In Remembrance of the Late Professor Dr. Kwame Bediako’, *Exchange* 37 (2008), 387–89.

<sup>4</sup> Bediako went by the name Kwame, which means ‘Saturday-born male child’ in Twi, throughout his life. His family name, Bediako, means ‘warrior’.

Depot. He excelled in his studies at one of Ghana's finest mission secondary schools,<sup>5</sup> and went from there to the University of Ghana. As an undergraduate student he studied French, and won a scholarship to pursue graduate studies at the University of Bordeaux, where he earned his first PhD in French Literature and African Literature in French.

## 2.1 Conversion and Marriage

Two important events took place during Bediako's time in France. First, he had a 'Damascus Road' experience of conversion to a robust, evangelical Christian faith. Bediako's parents were members of the Presbyterian Church in Ghana and Bediako had attended a Methodist school, but during his university days he was influenced by the French existentialists to set aside his Christian faith, and had come to consider himself an atheist. Hans Visser and Gillian Bediako describe Bediako's conversion experience as follows:

In 1970, in Bordeaux, France, he was collared, like Saul on his way to Damascus. Taking a shower one day, the fact that Christ is the Truth, the integrating principle of life as well as the key to true intellectual coherence, for himself and for the whole world, was impressed upon him with irresistible force. It took him some time to find a Bible, which he then read through several times.<sup>6</sup>

One short story may illustrate something of Bediako's religious progression. Before he left for France in 1969, Bediako's father took Kwame to a shrine to ask their ancestors for protection while he studied abroad. When Bediako returned to Ghana, his father suggested that they go thank the shrine-spirit for his safe return. By this time, however, Bediako had become a Christian, and he responded that he had come to understand that it was Jesus who protected him. His father accepted this, saying, 'If Christ protects you now, that's fine. We do not need to go to the shrine.' Kwame

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<sup>5</sup> Bediako attended the Methodist-founded Mfantshipim School, which numbers Kofi Anan, former Secretary General of the United Nations, among its graduates.

<sup>6</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, xi.



replied, ‘He protects you too, father. He is the wall surrounding us.’ His father was soundly converted to Christ some years later, before passing away in February 1999 at the age of eighty-four.<sup>7</sup>

As this anecdote suggests, Bediako’s upbringing was infused with a combination of mission-founded Christianity and Akan traditional religion. It is probably unfair to describe this background as ‘syncretistic’, since from the Akan traditional perspective becoming a Christian did not necessarily mean jettisoning one’s former spiritual links completely. Bediako went on to devote much of his mature theological thinking to consideration of how much continuity could exist between an African Christian theology and Africa’s primal past. As his comment to his father indicates, however, by the late 1970s he was already convinced that anything the ancestors might be asked to do, Christ has already done.

The second important event that took place during Bediako’s time in Bordeaux was his introduction to his future wife at the church he began attending after his conversion.<sup>8</sup> The two wed in 1973, and eventually had two sons. Mary Bediako, a scholar in her own right, earned a PhD at Aberdeen University with a dissertation on the subject of primal religions,<sup>9</sup> and would later help Kwame establish the Akrofi-Christaller Institute.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, xii.

<sup>8</sup> Omulokoli tells us that one of the first things Bediako did at this church was to begin a Good News Club for the Arab children living in his neighbourhood. Bediako understood himself to be both theologian and practitioner—a calling that included telling Muslim children the good news of the gospel. See ‘Kwame Bediako, A Deeply Christian Scholar’, 84.

<sup>9</sup> Walls, ‘Kwame Bediako and Christian Scholarship’, 189. Mary Bediako’s dissertation was later turned into a book, *Primal Religion and the Bible: William Robertson Smith and His Heritage* (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> As of October 2017, Mary Bediako continues to serve as the Institute’s Deputy Rector.

## 2.2 Further Education and Ordination

Kwame Bediako considered leaving his graduate studies immediately after his conversion, but was ultimately persuaded to finish. His next step, however, was to attend London Bible College where he earned a first-class degree in theology.<sup>11</sup> Bediako then returned to Ghana, where he was ordained into the Presbyterian Church of Ghana and took a position teaching at the Christian Service College in Kumasi. However, after two years—a period that included Bediako’s attendance at the first Lausanne Conference on World Evangelization, where he met other Christians from the non-western world and his own vision grew—it became clear that his contribution to theology and the church in Africa required him to get a second PhD. He did so at the University of Aberdeen, where he studied under Andrew Walls and in 1983 produced a dissertation titled ‘Identity and Integration: An Enquiry into the Nature and Problems of Theological Indigenization in Selected Early Hellenistic and Modern African Writers’—a title shortened to *Theology and Identity* when it was published in 1992.<sup>12</sup>

Upon returning to Ghana in 1984, Bediako first served as Resident Presbyterian Chaplain of the Accra Ridge Church, an international and inter-denominational congregation. He combined this with several other speaking, preaching and teaching engagements, including serving as a part-time lecturer in Comparative Religion and African Traditional Religions at Trinity Theological Seminary in Legon, Accra. His relationship with the seminary would continue even after he established the Akrofi-Christaller Institute.

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<sup>11</sup> It was here that the Bediakos met Andrew Walls for the first time.

<sup>12</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity* (Oxford: Regnum, 1992).

### 2.3 The Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission, and Culture

Bediako had a vision for African theology that no existing school was structured to fulfil. According to Andrew Walls, the reason was two-fold. First, Bediako believed that the assumptions underlying ‘Western intellectual models’ were inadequate for analysing and articulating African Christian theology. Second, he believed that African Christians had to make decisions at the intersection of their identity as Christians and members of their families and communities—another area where western ‘textbook theology rarely provided answers’.<sup>13</sup> From Bediako’s perspective, any attempt to apply the two-tiered epistemology of the West to African theology was like using a two-dimensional perspective to describe the three-dimensional African world, in which the spiritual and material cohered.

The Akrofi-Christaller Centre for Mission Research and Applied Theology—now called the Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission, and Culture—grew from this deep-seated conviction that the intellectual and spiritual tools of the West were simply inadequate. As Walls notes, the Institute’s ‘establishment and development lay at the heart of Bediako’s work for the rest of his life’.<sup>14</sup> Throughout his career, however, Bediako continued to teach in Europe (particularly through his continued association with Andrew Walls at the University of Edinburgh) and South Africa.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Walls, ‘Kwame Bediako and Christian Scholarship’, 190.

<sup>14</sup> Walls, ‘Kwame Bediako and Christian Scholarship’, 190. On its website, the Akrofi-Christaller Institute (ACI) describes itself as follows: ‘a research university promoting African innovation and excellence and dedicated to the study and documentation of Christian history, thought and life in Ghana and in Africa as a whole, in relation to their African setting and to world Christianity. ACI seeks to strengthen Christian witness in the modern Africa and the world context through Christian scholarship’. ‘Afroki-Christaller Institute (ACI), Afroki-Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission and Culture, accessed October 29, 2017, <http://www.acighana.org/site/aboutus/index.php>.

<sup>15</sup> Cultural anthropologists have raised the issue of place, mobility, and identity, particularly how the interaction of the first two plays a role in shaping identity. In Bediako’s work we can clearly see the impact of having lived for extended periods of time in France, England, Scotland, and Ghana. The contrasts he experienced helped him formulate in sharper detail his own Ghanaian and African identity. See Hazel Easthope, ‘Fixed Identities in a Mobile World? The Relationship between Mobility, Place, and

Bediako's theological method was not original to him; he learned from other scholars, particularly Harold Turner and Andrew Walls. Bediako built on their ideas particularly in his assertion that identity is a theological category for African scholars. This idea is rooted in Bediako's understanding that at the very heart of the universe is a divine-human relationship, a connection that is 'essentially spiritual, in which the "physical" acts as sacrament for "spiritual" power'.<sup>16</sup> Bediako considers this orientation toward reality and its influence on African identity as not only an essential component of African Christian theologies but also their most significant contribution to the global theological enterprise. We will begin our exploration of Bediako's ideas, however, by considering why an identity shaped by the single-tiered unitive perspective could never be satisfied by merely adapting a western iteration of Christianity—one shaped by a post-Enlightenment, two-tiered interpretive horizon—to the African context.

### **3. WHY INDIGENIZATION AND NOT MERE ADAPTATION?**

The concept of adaptation relies on the idea that the Christian faith reached its final, universal form in the theology of western Christendom. Consequently, other people groups need only 'adapt' the hymns, prayers, liturgy, and theology (language, terminology, and categories) inherited from the West to their culture. Adaptation implies that non-western cultures lag behind the West in the development of the spiritual and intellectual resources necessary to articulate a thoroughly Christian theology. Indigenization, on the other hand, argues that no one culture—or one culture's iteration of the Gospel—can ever stand as the final, universal form. Instead, each

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Identity', *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 16, no. 1 (2009): 61–82, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1070289Q802605810>.

<sup>16</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 101. Bediako borrowed this use of the words 'physical' and 'spiritual' from Harold Turner.

culture (or religio-culture) has both the potential and the responsibility to articulate its understanding of the Christian faith using the various resources available to it.

Indigenization requires using the people's own language, along with their own historical understanding of how God has revealed himself in and through their particular religio-cultures, to articulate the Gospel as revealed in the Word written and the Word incarnate.<sup>17</sup> For Bediako, Jesus' incarnation is the basis for believing that the Christian faith is at home in every culture.

Bediako's commitment to indigenization is grounded in his understanding that God revealed himself to Africans within their own traditional religions prior to the coming of the missionaries. The question Bediako asks is 'whether the churches as planted by the Western missionary effort could adequately come to terms with the realities of African life, especially the still potent realities of the traditional religions and their world-views'.<sup>18</sup> Bediako prefers the term 'indigenization' over 'inculturation' because he believes it articulates what Africa's first generation of Christian scholars were doing: rooting 'Christianity in African life by claiming for it a past in the spiritual

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<sup>17</sup> The scholarly literature describes a number of intermediate steps between adaptation and what Bediako calls 'indigenization'. Peter Sarpong, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Kumasi, a leading Akan Christian thinker, and a trained as a social anthropologist, provides a very detailed description in his book, *Peoples Differ*. Sarpong notes the following stages: *pedagogy, imposition, translation, adaptation, indigenisation, Africanisation, contextualisation*, and finally *inculturation*, which he defines as 'the incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question, but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about a new creation'. Peter Sarpong, *Peoples Differ* (Legon: Sub-Saharan, 2002), 32–33. Ben Knighton argues strongly for the term 'enculturation', which he defines as a process by which 'the historically mediated message of Jesus of Nazareth' is 'connected with the cosmic Christ present in each culture' (51). In this view, enculturation is a local rather than a global endeavor, so the recipients determine the outcome. Consequently, Knighton argues that 'Christian enculturation is a way for mission to realize a vernacular church of the people in a vast range of contexts' (63). Ben Knighton, 'Christian Enculturation in the Two-Thirds World', in *Global Christianity: Contested Claims*, ed. Wijsen Schreier (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 51–68. In a personal communication received on December 5, 2016, Knighton described the difference between 'inculturation' and 'enculturation' as follows: 'Inculturation assumes the church, led by clergy and theologians, will re-dress itself in more local clothes, without significantly changing the doctrine of the faith, and certainly not the ministry. Enculturation acknowledges the need for local culture to embrace the innovations posed by Christian faith, thus agency resides with the aggregate decisions of local people including the church.'

<sup>18</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 76.

harvests of the African pre-Christian religious heritage'.<sup>19</sup> Bediako calls this process 'indigenisation by Christianisation of the religious past'.<sup>20</sup>

As Opoku Onyinah has demonstrated, the first missionaries to arrive in Ghana were German pietists whose belief in the supernatural, while still present, was weakened by the tacit assumptions of the Enlightenment that had swept across Europe.<sup>21</sup> Because the understanding of the Christian faith brought to the Akan by the colonial missionaries was tacitly two-tiered in its perspective, it was inherently impossible to adapt this post-Enlightenment iteration of the Gospel to the single-tiered African context. The Akan understand what the West says perfectly well—they simply find it inadequate for describing the world they experience. Consequently, any theology emerging from the two-tiered world of the West will fail to make sense of the single-tiered religio-culture in which the Akan live and move and have their being. Mere adaptation will not suffice.

In considering Bediako's discussion of identity, I suggest that Bediako himself, deeply immersed in the single-tiered unitive perspective as he was, did not fully appreciate its role in his own thinking. He was aware, of course, that his Akan primal worldview differed from the western perception of reality, but he never explicitly discussed its place in forming the Akan identity. I believe we can sharpen the usefulness of identity as a hermeneutical key for understanding Akan Christian theology by placing it within the foundational context of the single-tiered perspective.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 76.

<sup>20</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 76.

<sup>21</sup> Opoku Onyinah writes that it was with 'traditional Christian beliefs in the devil, weakened by the criticisms during the Enlightenment—that missionaries began their ministries in Africa'. Opoku Onyinah, 'Akan Witchcraft and the Concept of Exorcism in the Church of Pentecost' (PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 2002), 133.

<sup>22</sup> Ogbu Kalu agrees that identity plays a critical role in theology, writing that 'local identities contest global processes' and touch 'the heart of theology as human reflection on God's relationship to human

#### 4. ANALYSING BEDIAKO'S UNDERSTANDING OF AFRICA'S 'ONTOLOGICAL PAST'

To unpack Kwame Bediako's understanding of 'identity', we must first examine his understanding of what he calls Africa's 'ontological past'. It is from this ontological past that a people's communal memory and primal imagination—both of which are essential to so much of what is creative and stimulating in African theology—emerge.

While Bediako does not precisely define the term 'ontological past', he uses it to refer to an African way of understanding the world and the reality Africans live with on a daily basis. Bediako first uses the term in *Theology and Identity*, where he connects Africa's 'ontological past' with its 'religious consciousness':

Looked at from the standpoint of the context of modern African theologians (that is, as *Christian* scholars), the traditional religions of Africa belong to the African religious past; but this is not so much a chronological past as an 'ontological' past. The theological importance of the religious past therefore consists in the fact that together with the profession of the Christian faith, it gives account of the same entity—namely, the history of the religious consciousness of the African Christian.<sup>23</sup>

This understanding of an 'ontological past' thus gives Bediako a way to conceptualize a theological foundation for the continuity between Africa's traditional religions and his own Christian faith. Coming out of that ontological past is what Bediako calls the people's 'religious consciousness'. This consciousness is shaped by the inseparable unity of the material and spiritual—what I am calling the Akan single-tiered unitive perspective on reality. This understanding of the world's unitive make-up

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beings and the world of nature'. Ogbu U. Kalu, 'Daughters of Ethiopia: Constructing a Feminist Discourse in Ebony Strokes', in *African Women, Religion, and Health*, ed. Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2006), 265.

<sup>23</sup> Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 4. Bediako first used the term in *Theology and Identity*, but found it useful in a number of other places. See 'The Roots of African Theology', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 13, no. 2 (April 1989): 58–64; 'Understanding African Christian Theology in the 20th Century', *Themelios* 20, no. 1 (October 1994): 14–20; 'Epilogue', in *On Their Way Rejoicing: The History and Role of the Bible in Africa*, ed. Ype Schaaf, trans. Paul Ellingworth (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994), 243–54; 'Types of African Theology', in *Christianity in Africa in the 1990s*, ed. Christopher Fyfe and Andrew Walls (Edinburgh: Centre of African Studies, 1996), 52–62; *Jesus in Africa*.

has created a common interpretive landscape for both Akan traditional religion and Akan Christian faith. To divorce people's pre-Christian primal understanding of reality, from which their traditional religions emerged, from converts' need to express their newfound Christian faith in ways consistent with this same understanding of reality can only lead to an inauthentic confession. Bediako argues, on the basis of Africa's 'ontological past', that the colonial missionaries erred by relying on two faulty assumptions. First, they assumed Africa was a *tabula rasa* in terms of any prior religious consciousness. Second, they assumed that Africans needed to think like 'civilized' Europeans or North Americans to become genuine Christians. Neither assumption was correct—nor, in Bediako's estimation, even possible.<sup>24</sup>

The fact that Bediako discusses Africa's 'ontological past' right at the beginning of *Theology and Identity* gives us a sense of its importance in his thinking. It also leads directly to another issue: how to study Africa's traditional religions. Bediako applauds earlier African scholars who engaged in 'intellectual struggle' while 'feeling after' a theological method within a field of enquiry charted largely by western anthropological scholars whose concepts and terminology could only be 'unacceptable' to Africans.<sup>25</sup> Terms like 'fetish', 'animist', 'polytheistic', 'primitive', 'uncivilized', and 'lower' were western intellectual categories invented to describe and interpret African religious tradition;<sup>26</sup> African Theology rejects them all.<sup>27</sup> Scholars like Idowu and Mbiti did not

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<sup>24</sup> In addition to making these points in *Christianity in Africa*, Bediako discusses them in 'Understanding African Christian Theology', 15; 'Why Has the Summer Ended and We Are Not Saved? Encountering the Real Challenge of Christian Engagement in Primal Contexts', *Journal of African Christian Thought* 11, no. 2 (December 2008): 5–8; and 'Roots of African Theology', 58–64.

<sup>25</sup> Bediako, 'Understanding African Christian Theology', 15. Bediako mentions John Mbiti, Vincent Mulago, Byang Kato, and Bolaji Idowu in *Theology and Identity*. He no doubt could also have added scholars such as Kwesi Dickson, John Pobee, Edward Fasholé-Luke, and others of their generation.

<sup>26</sup> It goes without saying that these categories reflect western scholars' attempts to tap their own two-tiered understanding of reality for concepts to explain phenomena inherently foreign to their experience. In a sense, their two-tiered identity functioned like an AM receiver trying to tune in to an FM signal.



write to gain the attention of western academics by using western terminology, as though that terminology was privileged—instead, they examined their own ontological pasts for ways to describe their Christian faith through the lens of their African identity. At the same time, Bediako asserts the right of African Christian scholars to do their work as Christians without accepting the kind of neo-colonial imposition that would have them privilege the western religious studies approach, the secularism of which is rooted in phenomenology or comparative religion. Bediako insists that ‘the African theologian’s concern with the traditional religions of Africa must find its fullest interpretation within the framework of *Christian* theology’.<sup>28</sup>

Bediako observes that the critics of the first-generation African theologians understood what these pioneering scholars were doing, they simply did not approve of it.<sup>29</sup> From their perspective, the African scholars Bediako so admires were muddying the waters by making Africa’s traditional religions something they could not be—namely, the basis for something to follow. Bediako, however, argues that ‘African Theology’ is ‘charting a new course in theological method’.<sup>30</sup> This new theological method is continuous with ancient Christian tradition, even if discontinuous with post-Enlightenment Christianity in the West. An ‘identity’ rooted in Africa’s single-tiered ontological past (and present) provides a number of new categories with which to formulate an understanding of the Gospel, even if these categories are largely ignored in the dominant western context of post-Enlightenment modernity. Bediako argues forcefully that this African identity must be re-discovered and re-employed by African

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<sup>27</sup> Bediako, ‘Understanding African Christian Theology’, 15. Bediako uses the term ‘African Theology’ to refer to theological work done by Africans.

<sup>28</sup> Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 5.

<sup>29</sup> Bediako has in mind critics such as Okot p’Bitek, Ali Mazrui, and Osofo Okomfo Kwabena Damuah (a former Roman Catholic priest who left the church to found the Afrikania Mission).

<sup>30</sup> Bediako, ‘Understanding African Christian Theology’, 16.

Christian scholars if African theology is to ever be anything other than western Christendom overlaid with a thin veneer of African clothing, dance, and music. While westerners may seem to have forgotten their pre-Christian identities (though Bediako argues that this is not strictly possible), Africans have not forgotten their ontological past. They are confronted with that past on a daily basis.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, African Christian scholars work not in a library or museum full of long forgotten ideas and practices, but with the very stuff of their lives. This reality forces African Christian scholars to ask questions pertaining to the ideas that shape the African world-view, and thus their identities as Africans.

This, Bediako argues, is the answer to Adrian Hastings's concern that Africa's traditional religions do not contain adequate precursors for a number of the key doctrines of the Christian faith. This would only be the case, Bediako asserts, if Africans were under some obligation to use categories arising from the history of western Christianity.<sup>32</sup> For Bediako, producing an African Christian theology is inevitably deeply personal.<sup>33</sup> Why, then, would Africans adopt the identity of believers shaped by western Christianity rather than draw on their own identity, shaped by their own ontological past, to formulate their theological questions? Bediako insists that the African identity, shaped by this ontological past, will both provide its own categories and adopt other categories from the Christian tradition to produce theologies that are both Christian and African. The real challenge faced by African Christian scholars,

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<sup>31</sup> See Bediako, 'Understanding African Christian Theology', and 'Five Theses on the Significance of Modern African Christianity: A Manifesto', *Transformation* 13, no. 1 (January 1986): 20-29 for Bediako's discussion of these issues.

<sup>32</sup> See Adrian Hastings, *African Theology* (New York: Crossroads, 1976), 52. While Bediako believed Hastings was wrong to worry that theology emerging from the African identity would lack key categories, he did appreciate Hastings's understanding that African theology would involve 'a perennial dialogue between the African Christian scholar and the spiritualities of Africa'. Bediako, 'Understanding African Christian Theology', 16.

<sup>33</sup> Bediako, 'Understanding African Christian Theology', 16.

then, is to integrate their ontological past with their Christian faith while ‘confronting constantly the question as to how and how far the “old” and the “new” in African religious consciousness could become integrated into a unified vision of what it meant to be African and Christian’.<sup>34</sup>

#### 4.1 Africa’s Primal Imagination

Having established the importance of Africa’s ontological past, we will now look more closely at the past that Bediako describes as Africa’s primal spiritual universe and the imagination that emerges from it.<sup>35</sup> Bediako situates the identity that he uses as a category for writing African Christian theology within this understanding of reality—an understanding that does not separate reality into separate sacred and secular ‘tiers’, but holds them together in a unitive whole.<sup>36</sup> It is important to state here that Bediako is not simply noting a difference in perspective between the West and himself. Bediako is convinced that he is describing what is real ontologically. His use of the term ‘ontological past’ demonstrates this. Bediako knows this is not ‘provable’, using the criteria of natural cause and effect, but as a theologian he is not hesitant to claim its reality.

Bediako discusses Africa’s ‘primal world-view’ in *Christianity in Africa*, where he draws heavily on Harold W. Turner’s discussion of the six features of the primal

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<sup>34</sup> Bediako, ‘Understanding African Christian Theology’, 16.

<sup>35</sup> Like Taylor and Turner before him, Bediako uses the word ‘primal’ to describe that which was present in the African understanding of reality prior to the arrival of western colonizers. His use of the term is descriptive and in no way pejorative; it parallels Andrew Walls’s use of the word ‘anterior’. Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 214; John V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence amid African Religion* (London: SCM, 1963); H. W. Turner, ‘The Primal Religions of the World and Their Study’, in *Australian Essays in World Religions*, ed. Victor C. Hayes (Adelaide: Australian Association for the Study of Religions, 1977), 27–37; Andrew F. Walls, ‘Editorial: Thoughts on the Background to the Project’, *Journal of African Christian Thought* 11, no. 2 (December 2008): 3.

<sup>36</sup> Bediako also describes what I am calling the single-tiered interpretive landscape as Africa’s ‘sacramental universe’, a term adopted from H. W. Turner. Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 95. Cf. Turner, ‘Primal Religions of the World’, 27–37.

imagination. In doing so, he emphasizes Turner's point that the primal imagination is more than society's projection or a mere 'epiphenomena of the social organisation of simple ... pre-literate societies'.<sup>37</sup> Instead, the primal imagination evidences a coherent and internally-consistent understanding of the world.

Bediako discusses the following six features identified by Turner as characteristics of the primal imagination: (1) A sense of kinship with nature, in which animals and plants have their own spiritual existence. (2) A deep sense that humans are finite, weak, impure or sinful, and in need of power not their own. (3) A sense that we are not alone in the universe—that is, that there is a spiritual world of powers or beings that are more powerful and ultimate than humans and that are active in humans' lives. Some of these beings are benevolent and others malevolent, some local and others universal. As Bediako puts it,

The universe of primal religions is thus a personalised universe, in which the appropriate question is not "*What* caused this or that?" but "*Who* did it?" Man therefore lives with an awareness of the presence of transcendent powers which, however, are ambivalent.<sup>38</sup>

(4) An understanding that humans can enter into relationship with benevolent spirits and so enjoy their benefits and protections. (5) An acute sense that life continues in the spiritual or supernatural realm after one's physical death. This explains the importance of the ancestors and the 'living dead', who remain in close and vital connection with the 'living living'. (6) An awareness of living in a 'sacramental universe'. Turner notes that in primal religions people live in a world where there is no sharp break 'between the

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<sup>37</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 93. The word 'simple' here would be the pejorative sense of 'primal'. Bediako, like Turner, appreciates the insights of social anthropology but is clear in his refusal to reduce theology to anthropology. He is thus unwilling to consider Durkheim's understanding of religion as a societal projection of itself into the transcendent world as an adequate or satisfactory description of religion.

<sup>38</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 94.

physical and the spiritual'.<sup>39</sup> Further, the physical is patterned after the spiritual. For Bediako, this is the most important of the six features.

Man lives “in a sacramental universe where there is no sharp dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual”. Accordingly, the ‘physical’ acts as vehicle for ‘spiritual’ power “whilst the physical realm is held to be patterned on the model of the spiritual world beyond...” where “one set of powers, principles and patterns runs through all things on earth and in the heavens and welds them into a unified cosmic system”.<sup>40</sup>

Bediako is intrigued by Turner’s assertion that ‘it is the people of the primal religions who have made the greatest response’ to the Christian faith.<sup>41</sup> At the same time, he sees the argument that ‘conveying the primal conception of the universe as a unified cosmic system, essentially spiritual, which provides the real key to the entire structure’ of the primal imagination as Turner’s most important point.<sup>42</sup> In short, Bediako indicated early on in his theological career that this single-tiered unitive perspective was fundamental to his writing and reading of African Christian theology. Further, I would add that, without a proper appreciation of the role played by this

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<sup>39</sup> Turner, ‘Primal Religions of the World’, 32.

<sup>40</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 95.

<sup>41</sup> Turner, ‘Primal Religions of the World’, 32; quoted in Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 95–96. Bediako returns often to Turner’s observation that primal cultures are the most responsive to the gospel. In an epilogue to Ype Schaaf’s, *On Their Way Rejoicing*, for example, he writes: “It is worth mentioning that when the Edinburgh Conference of 1910 concluded that the primal religions of Africa contained no ‘preparation for the gospel’, the realization that the primal religions of the world have, in fact, provided the religious background of the faith of the majority of Christians in the twenty centuries of Christian history, including the Christians of Europe, still lay in the future. ... In relation to our present discussion, what is important is the fact that Europe shares with Africa a pre-Christian primal religious heritage. But it is in Africa (as in some other parts of the non-Western world) that the significance of the primal religions in the history of Christianity has been seen for what it is.” Bediako, ‘Epilogue’, 248. Bediako also expresses similar sentiments elsewhere: *Christianity in Africa*, 205; ‘Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religions’, in *Sharing Jesus in the Two Thirds World*, ed. Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 136–137. Bediako also approvingly noted other scholars who made similar points, including Andrew Walls, ‘Africa and Christian Identity’, *Mission Focus* 4, no. 7 (November 1978): 11–13; John Mbiti, ‘African Indigenous Culture in Relation to Evangelism and Church Development’, in *The Gospel and Frontier Peoples*, ed. R. Pierce Beaver (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1973), 79–95. Bediako also pointed to Lamin Sanneh, whose work noted that the parts of the world that have experienced the most marked accession to the Christian religion are also the areas of the highest concentration of the old traditional religions. Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 192.

<sup>42</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 96.

single-tiered perspective, people outside the African context will lack the proper hermeneutical key to unlocking the depth of Africa's contribution to the global Christian theological enterprise.

Bediako goes beyond merely advocating for the validity of the single-tiered perspective, however. Indeed, he argues it is by understanding and recapturing this primal spiritual (or sacramental) universe—with its assumption of a rich, robust, and permeable relationship between the natural and supernatural—and bringing it to bear in their theological writings that African theologians will make their most important contributions to the global church. These contributions, Bediako argues, are particularly necessary in a world that seems to have 'expelled' this holistic understanding of reality from consideration, resulting in the disastrous fact-faith divide seen in the West.

If there is only a minimal 'paradigm-shift' as we pass from the spiritual universe of primal religions into the spiritual environment of the Christian faith ('this is what we have been waiting for'), then one would want to pursue the matter by asking how the primal imagination might bring its own peculiar gifts to the shaping of Christian affirmation. This issue becomes even more pressing if Christian thought has hitherto been moulded by a world-view from which the living forces of the primal imagination seem to have been expelled.<sup>43</sup>

Bediako argues that the western imagination, constrained by its two-tiered perspective and excessive privileging of material cause and effect, needs help from the more fully integrated primal imagination and its grasp of a unified cosmic system. He further suggests that the recapture of this primal imagination will be one of Africa's significant contributions to global Christianity's understanding of the transcendent and immanent and how we as human beings relate to this God. Again, the single-tiered unitive understanding of reality is essential:

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<sup>43</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 96. Bediako is thinking particularly of Christianity's movement into northern Europe—a subject he discusses in several places, and one we will return to in our discussion of continuity and discontinuity below.

In such a universe or in such a conception of the universe, the Transcendent is not a so-called 'spiritual' world separate from the realm of regular human existence, since human existence itself participates in the constant interplay of the divine-human encounter. Consequently, the conclusion ... that at the heart of the universe and of religion is a divine-human relationship for the fulfilment of man's divine destiny, constitutes a real advance and lies at the heart of the contribution which African theology from a primal perspective can make to a fresh Christian account of the Transcendent.<sup>44</sup>

Bediako argues that Africa's orientation towards a primal, sacramental universe brings it close to the universe we see depicted in Scripture (and in pre-Christian northern Europe). Bediako agrees with Walls and Turner that, throughout history, Christianity has taken root and flourished in environments with just such an underlying view of reality. Gone, in Bediako's opinion, are the relatively recent days when Dietrich Westermann represented a significant voice within western missiological thinking who argued that missionaries had to be ruthless in rejecting and eliminating all pre-existing spiritual elements in the religions of those they sought to reach for Christ.<sup>45</sup> Instead, Bediako can now say African Christian theology cannot develop without a proper appreciation of the role played by Africa's primal religious background as it took shape within traditional religions.<sup>46</sup>

Bediako argues that it is a smaller step for an African like himself to come to biblical faith than it would be for either a westerner or a practitioner of Hinduism, Buddhism, or a more philosophically-inclined Asian religion. Another way of saying this is that Africans, whose identities have been shaped by the primal spiritual universe in which they were nurtured, need travel only a very short distance to reach an identity

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<sup>44</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 101.

<sup>45</sup> In his 1935 Duff Lecture (published as *Africa and Christianity*) Dietrich Westermann said, 'However anxious a missionary may be to appreciate and retain indigenous social and moral values, in the case of religion, he has to be ruthless ... he must admit and even emphasise that the religion he teaches is opposed to the existing one and the one has to cede to the other.' Dietrich Westermann, *Africa and Christianity* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), 2; quoted in Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 191.

<sup>46</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 192.

shaped by biblical faith. The reason, again, is that contemporary Africans and the biblical writers share an understanding of reality that holds together the natural and supernatural in a permeable and interactive whole. Both the African primal imagination and the biblical imagination are shaped by a unitive perspective. Thus, by embracing his African identity, Bediako found that he already had a place for the Gospel to land and take root.

Bediako makes the point that the primal imagination is used not only by individuals but also by the community of faith—a community that includes both the living and the living dead. ‘Since this is a community constituted in Christ and actualized through the Spirit, that is, in terms of spirit, it includes both living and dead. Thus the divine presence in the community of believers constitutes it into a “transcendent” community in which the human components experience and share in the divine life and nature.’<sup>47</sup> This is important to Bediako because he believes Africa’s contribution to the life of the global church may very well lie in reorienting the Christian life away from a focus on ideas and toward a life rooted in God and those sources of power emanating from God.<sup>48</sup> He thus offers an approving quote of the words of the Greek Orthodox Bishop Anastasios Yannoulatos at the 1973 Ibadan Conference on ‘Growing into an Awareness of Primal World-views’:

Primal religions generally conceive of religion as a system of power and of living religiously as being in touch with the Source and channels of power in the universe; Christian theology in the West seems, on the whole, to understand the Christian Gospel as a system of ideas. And yet, when the apostle Paul described the Gospel, it was in terms of the Gospel as ‘the

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<sup>47</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, 94. He points to 1 Cor 10.14–22 and 2 Pt 1.4 for biblical support: 2 Peter speaks of becoming partakers of the ‘divine nature’, while 1 Corinthians speaks of the Lord’s Supper as a ‘participation’ in the body and blood of Christ in contrast to participating in the world of the ‘demons’.

<sup>48</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 106.



power of God to save all who believe ...' (Romans 1.16). Surely this calls for a new idiom.<sup>49</sup>

Bediako believed he could see just such a 'new idiom' developing in the ministries of Prophet Harris and then-Archbishop Emmanuel Milingo.

Bediako found William Wade Harris remarkable not primarily for his success in winning converts (120,000 in two years) but for his embodiment of an early, self-confident 'paradigm both of a non-Western and essentially primal apprehension of the Gospel ... uncluttered by Western missionary controls'.<sup>50</sup> Harris, Bediako argues, demonstrated how Africans could use their own 'primal imagination' and ability 'to function in a spiritual universe which was both simple and complex' to make sense of the world 'as a totality'.<sup>51</sup> In this capacity, Bediako sees the inherent advantage of the single-tiered perspective over the West's two-tiered approach.

Bediako found a more recent parallel to Prophet Harris in Emmanuel Milingo, who was at that time a Roman Catholic Archbishop. Milingo developed a ministry of healing, exorcism, and pastoral care which, like Harris's work, responded to the 'thought-patterns, perceptions of reality and the concepts of identity and community which prevail within the primal world-view of African societies'.<sup>52</sup> Further, Milingo believed that 'the spiritual universe of the African primal world' offered a valid understanding of reality within which to articulate a fully Christian theology.<sup>53</sup> In Harris and Milingo, then, Bediako found two men from different parts of the twentieth century

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<sup>49</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 106; *Jesus in Africa*, 95–96.

<sup>50</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 91–92.

<sup>51</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 92.

<sup>52</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 93.

<sup>53</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 92–93.

thinking along similar lines as they used their rational imaginations, which had been shaped by and in turn reflected the primal spiritual universe of Africa's ontological past.

Bediako drew upon the 1973 Consultation on Christian dialogue with traditional thought forms, held in Ibadan, Nigeria, to make the point that while the overt religious expressions of the primal spiritual universe may disappear, 'the beliefs and values, the views about reality, man and the world, that prevailed in a primal society may survive ... and continue to provide at least part of its terms of reference in a new and more complex situation, indeed even within a new religious faith and practice'.<sup>54</sup> In other words, the interpretive horizon emerging from the single-tiered unitive perspective provides exactly the resources needed to accomplish what Andrew Walls called the 'conversion' of Africa's traditional religions. Bediako envisions a new iteration of the Christian faith emerging from the primal worldview, particularly its cosmological structure, shaped by theological beliefs that serve to determine which elements of the traditional worldview are consistent with Christian faith.

## 4.2 Integrity in Conversion and Memory

We cannot discuss Bediako's understanding of Africa's ontological past without taking note of Bediako's frequent discussions of two related issues: integrity in conversion, and memory. One way to understand his most important work, *Theology and Identity*, is to recognize that it is here that Bediako worked out what 'integrity in conversion' could look like for an African who wants to be both a Christian and an African who continues to embrace his or her African identity. He did so by finding within the writings of the Church Fathers an analogue that he and his friends could follow. The Fathers, Bediako argues, found language and categories with which to

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<sup>54</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 107.

understand the biblical revelation from within their Greco-Roman cultural identity. This necessarily involved a process of linguistic and cultural translation as they dealt with Jewish texts, but they did not have to become Jewish before they became Christian. They could become Greco-Roman Christians. According to Bediako, this was possible because Jesus' incarnation, an event in time and space, demonstrates the 'infinite translatability' of God's revelation to all people—people with their myriad cultural identities.<sup>55</sup>

Bediako's introduction to *Theology and Identity* includes a sub-section titled 'Towards a New Interpretative Paradigm (1): The "Christian Identity" Problem', in which he quotes Bengt Sundkler's appeal to Paul's encouragement to become a Jew to the Jews and so forth in order to more effectively communicate the Gospel. It followed, Sundkler asserted, that theologians looking to understand Africa must start with Africans' own understanding of their existence in the world. What does that world look like? How does it operate?

A theologian who with the Apostle is prepared to become to the Jews as a Jew, to them that are without law, as without law, and *therefore*, unto Africans as an African, must needs start with the fundamental facts of the African interpretation of existence and the universe.<sup>56</sup>

Like other African theologians, Bediako was looking at a religious heritage that had shaped who he was and how he saw the world around him. He understood on a personal level what his teacher Andrew Walls meant when he wrote that in making identity the locus of their work, African scholars were 'handling dynamite, [their] own

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<sup>55</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 109. Bediako borrows the term from Walls, who wrote, 'The faith of Christ is infinitely translatable, it creates "a place to feel at home."' Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of the Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 25.

<sup>56</sup> Bengt Sundkler, *The Christian Ministry in Africa* (London: SCM, 1962), 100; quoted in Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 3.

past, [their] people's present'.<sup>57</sup> Intent on cultivating an identity that is both African and Christian, Bediako embraced Kenneth Cragg's idea of 'integrity of conversion' for anyone coming to Christian faith out of the African 'religious consciousness' or 'African religious heritage'.<sup>58</sup> For Cragg, 'integrity of conversion' means holding together and integrating a person's past and present, as opposed to jettisoning the past as useless. (Bediako, of course, is thinking in terms of Africa's 'ontological past'.) Cragg describes integrity in conversion as a 'unity of self in which one's past is genuinely integrated into present commitment. Thus the crisis of repentance and faith that makes us Christians truly integrates what we have been in what we become.'<sup>59</sup>

In a passage that anticipates a conversation he would later engage in with critics such as Okot p'Bitek, Ali Mazrui, Edward Wilmot Blyden, and Osofo Okomfo Kwabena Damuah, who argue that Christianity is a foreign imposition on Africa,<sup>60</sup> Bediako argues that an African Christian identity must have the kind of integrity Cragg advocated—hence the importance of the role of the pre-Christian spiritual universe in forming Africans like himself. According to Bediako, 'if African theologians are to

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<sup>57</sup> Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of the Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996); quoted in Bediako, 'Types of African Theology', 60.

<sup>58</sup> The term is the title of J.N.K. Mugambi's *The African Religious Heritage*, (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1976).

<sup>59</sup> Kenneth Cragg, 'Conversion and Convertibility – With Special Reference to Muslims', in *Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture*, ed. John R. W. Stott and Robert Coote (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 194; quoted in Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 4.

<sup>60</sup> I will discuss Okot p'Bitek's critique in greater detail in the next chapter. Osofo Okomfo ('Osofo' and 'Okomfo' are religious titles, not part of Damuah's actual name) Kwabena Damuah, formerly Father Vincent Kwabena Damuah, was born in April 1930, a native of Wasa Amanfi Traditional Area in the Western Region, to the south-west of Ghana. He was ordained to the Roman Catholic priesthood in 1957 at the age of 27. He later came to the United States for further education at Canisius University in Buffalo, NY, Duquene University in Pittsburgh, PA, and Howard University in Washington, DC, where he received his PhD for a dissertation titled 'The Changing Perspective of Wasa Amanfi Traditional Religion in Contemporary Africa' (1971). In 1982, twenty-five years after his ordination, Damuah left the Roman Catholic Church and founded the Afrikania Mission. He also took at that time the name of Osofo Okomfo Kwabena Damuah. Bediako considered Damuah to be an important figure, and devoted an entire chapter in *Christianity in Africa* (chapter 2, titled 'African Identity: The Afrikania Challenge') to his thought. Bediako discusses Blyden's work in Chapter One of *Christianity in Africa*.

answer their critics effectively, a clear definition of African Christian identity and how it integrates into an adequate sense of African selfhood will doubtless form part of the response'.<sup>61</sup>

This is the context for Bediako's discussion of the history of colonial missions in Africa. By denying to Africans an ontological past worth having, he argues, the colonial missionaries denied Africa its memory. And without that memory, the Christian community in Africa became, as John Mbiti described it, a 'Church without theology and without theological consciousness'.<sup>62</sup> Bediako summarizes: 'Theological consciousness presupposes religious tradition, and tradition requires memory, and memory is integral to identity: without memory we have no past, and if we have no past, then we lose our identity.'<sup>63</sup> If African Christian theology is to touch an African's whole person on a deep level,

space had to be made for a positive pre-Christian religious memory in the African Christian consciousness, on the basis that 'religion informs the African's life in its totality'. Memory is integral to identity; and without memory, none of us knows who we are. As Dickson further explains, the theologian who fails to 'recognize the structures of religion as revealed by the historian of religions ... may not notice the absence of religion from his theology. In the context of Africa, Christian theology must, of necessity take account of that understanding of religion which bears the stamp of an authentic African contribution.'<sup>64</sup>

Bediako agrees, finally, with Walls that to take away a people's past is to leave them as 'amnesiacs', not knowing who they are. Hence, Bediako understands, as Walls writes, that 'the prime African theological quest at present is this: what is the past of the

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<sup>61</sup> Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 10.

<sup>62</sup> Bediako, 'Types of African Theology', 58.

<sup>63</sup> Andrew F. Walls, 'Africa and Christian Identity', *Mission Focus* 6, no. 7 (November 1978): 13; quoted in Bediako, 'Types of African Theology', 58.

<sup>64</sup> Bediako, 'Epilogue', 250. Here Bediako is quoting Dickson, (*Theology in Africa*, 29, 46), who I take to be referring to Africa's primal religions.

African Christian? What is the relationship between Africa's old religions and her new one?'<sup>65</sup>

### 4.3 The West's Forgotten Past

Bediako drives home his point on African theologians' need to take their ontological past seriously by pointing to the West's failure to do so when the Gospel spread into northern Europe. As an observer of the tacit in regard to the West, Bediako believed the first missionaries to northern Europe erred in not dealing with that region's primal religions. He believed it was a mistake with long-lasting consequences that the West's history with the Christian faith started under the false assumption that people's primal beliefs could be swept away and Christianity built on virgin soil. Bediako argues that missionaries who came from Europe (and European-derived churches in North America) to Africa repeated this mistake. Confronted with a robust spiritual world emerging from the interpretive horizon of the single-tiered unitive perspective, post-Enlightenment Christian missionaries—even those who were evangelical in their theology and thus presumably still believed in a God of miracles—had trouble seeing this African world of deities, spirits, and ancestors as anything other than a collection of superstitions to be eradicated. Bediako argues that, having dismissed its own primal past, the West had no experience and no tools with which to deal with what they found in Africa. As an observer of the tacit, however, Bediako was able to point out and question the fact that people in the West have remained fascinated with the occult and the workings of spirits exercising power outside the normal explanatory narrative of material cause and effect.

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<sup>65</sup> Andrew F. Walls, 'Africa and Christian Identity', *Mission Focus* 6, no. 7 (November 1978): 13; quoted in Bediako, 'Types of African Theology', 58.

Bediako first argues that pre-Christian Europe shared with Africa a primal religious heritage. However, in Europe that heritage was replaced by Christianity ‘to such an extent that the primal traditions were virtually completely wiped out’.<sup>66</sup> Second, he notes that ‘there was no sustained interest in the use of indigenous European languages and their pre-Christian world-views for Christian purposes’, which means that ‘the Western religious memory may never be fully recovered’.<sup>67</sup> Nonetheless, while this primal religious worldview may have died out on the surface, remnants of it persisted in the West’s names for days of the week (and some months of the year), the co-option of pre-Christian holidays, and a rise in interest and exploration of the occult.<sup>68</sup>

In contrast, Bediako argues that Christians in Africa fully engaged their primal past at the ‘frontier’ and ‘interface of their Christian faith’ and ‘the perennial spiritualities of their African primal heritage’.<sup>69</sup> Unlike the West, which tried to wipe its primal past from its memory, Africa embraced its heritage. Africans understood that memory is essential to knowing who you are and where you came from, and thus to identity. By attempting to wipe out its pre-Christian memory, the West lost touch with—but could not fully forget—the spiritual world of its own primal past. Bediako suggests that Africans who have sought ways to incorporate their primal religious memory into their Christian faith may have something important to teach western Christians. Bediako argues that part of the post-modern rejection of the Enlightenment, seen in ‘the resurgence of the phenomenon of the occult as well as the various “quests”

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<sup>66</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, 59.

<sup>67</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, 59.

<sup>68</sup> Arguably Bediako has overstated his case. In making his point he does not cite scholarly literature in support nor does he consider several significant pieces of counter-evidence. Anglo-Saxon Christianity, in its selection of holy places for churches and in its reworking of pre-Christian poetry, perhaps most notably in *Beowulf*, are cases in point.

<sup>69</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, 59.

for spiritual experience and wholeness, even if without explicit reference to God, bear the marks of a primal world-view'. They are

indicators that a primal world-view, suppressed rather than encountered, redeemed and integrated, rises to haunt the future. The viability of Christian consciousness that retains its sense of the spiritual world of primal religions, and the theological encounter between the primal world view and Christian faith evident in African Christianity—constitute an implicit challenge to the notion that humanity can be fully defined in post-Enlightenment terms.<sup>70</sup>

Bediako believes this line of study may indeed prove to be the way forward 'into the Christian future and the future of Christian theology',<sup>71</sup> in which case Africa will help show the way. Here Bediako sees the possibility of the West, freed from its cultural pride, gaining valuable insights into how to confront its own dire circumstance (captured in Lesslie Newbigin's question, 'Can the West be converted?')<sup>72</sup> from the experience of Africa and the churches of the global South.<sup>73</sup> Bediako makes the case that Africa can show the global church how to engage with non-Christian traditions in an evangelistic, missionary, and apologetic way. While the West substituted Christianity for its pre-Christian religions shortly after the missionaries arrived, Africa did not. But as neo-paganism returns to the West, Africa has the opportunity to show how a robust Christian theology might interact because Africa has always operated in this setting. Africa has the advantage of experience making room for its own pre-

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<sup>70</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, 59–60. For a longer discussion to the same effect, see Kwame Bediako, 'Five Theses', 27.

<sup>71</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, 60.

<sup>72</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, 'Can the West Be Converted?' *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11, no. 1 (January 1987): 2–7.

<sup>73</sup> Bediako writes, 'By reading and interpreting all Christian history as *mission history*, it will become possible to discover that some of the clues for understanding the issues confronting Christian witness in the modern West lie in the history of similar encounters elsewhere in the meeting of the gospel with other cultures. Missiology will become, thus, not just learning techniques for communicating the gospel to other peoples and cultures different from one's own; it becomes also an exercise in self-understanding within Christian scholarship. In this sense, the *re-evangelization of the modern West may require Western Christian scholarship to discover the universal relevance of the Church's missionary learning experience gained in the non-Western world.*' Bediako, 'Five Theses', 26; italics added.



Christian religious memory in its present Christian consciousness. And as Bediako noted, ‘without memory we have no past, and if we have no past, then we lose our identity’.<sup>74</sup> So then, Bediako notes:

It is this relocation of African primal religions ‘at the very centre of the academic stage’ which may prove a benediction to Western Christian theology as it also seeks to be communicative, evangelistic and missionary in its own context. ... A serious Christian theological interest in the European primal traditions and in the early forms of Christianity which emerged from the encounter with those traditions could provide a fresh approach to understanding Christian identity in the West too, as well as opening new possibilities for Christian theological endeavour today. And the primal world-view may turn out to be not so alien to the West after all, even in a post-Enlightenment era.<sup>75</sup>

It is worth taking note of a short article by Hinne Waganaar, who tried to apply Bediako’s challenge to his own Frisian heritage.<sup>76</sup> Waganaar erred, however, in seeking direct continuity between his Frisian past and Africa’s ontological past. Waganaar’s wooden reading of Bediako missed the importance of locating continuity ‘analogically’ within the interpretive landscape emerging from the single-tiered unitive perspective.<sup>77</sup> Ingrid M. Reneau Walls provides a much better example of this approach: she was able to use the valuable insights she gained by studying her own Creole background in Belize to facilitate her work with Sudanese people precisely because she understands that continuity functions at the primal level of Sudan’s ontological past.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Bediako, ‘Types of African Theology’, 58.

<sup>75</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 18.

<sup>76</sup> Hinne Waganaar, ‘Theology, Identity and the Pre-Christian Past: A Critical Analysis of Dr. K. Bediako’s Theology from a Frisian Perspective’, *International Review of Mission* 88, no. 351 (1999): 364–80.

<sup>77</sup> Chapter Four will deal at length with the idea of ‘analogical continuity’, which sees continuity emerging from and within the interpretive horizon established by the single-tiered unitive perspective. In Epilogue, I will suggest that Ingrid Undset’s magisterial three-part novel, *Kristin Lavrensdatter*, illustrates Bediako’s suggestion that the West needs to re-discover its own primal past.

<sup>78</sup> Ingrid M. Reneau Walls, ‘Called from a Caul: Personal Reflections on Christian Mission and the Primal Heritage’, in Bediako, Quarshie, and Asamoah-Gyadu, 162–73.

## 5. THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN EXPRESSING IDENTITY

In Chapters Three, Four, and Seven of his 1995 book, *Christianity in Africa*, Kwame Bediako discusses the importance of vernacular languages for the growth of Christianity in Africa. His argument—that language itself not only reflects but also shapes identity—is both sophisticated and important for the development of African Christian theologies. It is significant to note that Bediako lays out this argument in the very book where he makes the claim that Christianity in Africa is a non-western religion. He argues his case on two fronts. First, Jesus’ incarnation is the basis for understanding that all languages and (religio-) cultures are capable of transmitting the truth of the Gospel; second, the eschatological promise that when Christ returns people ‘from every tongue, tribe, and nation’ will worship him in their own languages is profoundly important.

Bediako begins by tracing, in Chapter Three (‘Christianity and African Liberation: Reaffirming a Heritage’), how an indigenous scholarly tradition grew out of the Christian educational program begun by European missionaries, especially Johannes Christaller and the Basel Mission. As Twi became a written language with its own translation of the Bible, Akan Christians gained direct access to biblical truth. Though some missionaries did not realize it, the Akan language already provided these first Akan Christians with cultural and theological insights not apparent to the missionaries themselves.<sup>79</sup> This development continued, Bediako writes, as ‘Twi-speaking culture ... effectively ceased to be solely an oral culture’ and Akan Christians began to develop their own answers to questions that emerged from their religio-culture, a development

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<sup>79</sup> When the Scots followed the Swiss they continued the work of vernacular scholarship by extending its reach beyond the Bible to the Greek classics, which were also translated into Twi. Akropong Seminary became a research institution as well as a school for pastors and teachers—something not envisioned by its founders. Bediako writes, ‘If Hebrew and Greek provided the means for Africans to have access to the fullness of the divine truth in the Bible, now an African language served to mediate to Africans the literary treasures of another people. Twi has become, in the words of Christaller, a “book language”.’ Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 53.

made possible by the seeds ‘sown in the educational vision of the Basel Mission in the nineteenth century’.<sup>80</sup> Consequently, the dialogue between Akan religio-culture and the gospel takes place within the indigenous categories of the people, conceptually framed by their languages rather than the inculturated languages of the West.

The synergistic relationship between language, religio-culture, and identity has given Bediako and his colleagues the freedom to produce an understanding of the gospel controlled by biblical truth using categories that emerge from the single-tiered unitive landscape. At the same time, Christaller and the Akropong School never lost sight of their missiological purpose. Their close study of Twi allowed them to make their translations more accurate not just at the level of denotation but at the level of the long-standing lexical range of those words, a range that included the robust and nuanced world available to the Akan through their single-tiered unitive understanding of reality. Bediako illustrates his point by recounting the mistake made by early Europeans who, because they assumed the local people were polytheists, pluralized the Akan *Onyame* into *Anyame* to translate ‘gods’ in the Old Testament. The correction of this mistake not only gave translators a clearer understanding of Akan traditional religion, it also allowed the church to grow in its understanding of what Scripture means when it speaks of ‘gods’.

In Chapter Four (‘How Is It That We Hear in Our Own Languages the Wonders of God?’: Christianity as Africa’s Religion’), Bediako advances his argument by pointing out that the gospel is apprehended first through the vernacular translations of the faith as the Bible is translated into Africa’s various languages. Bediako avoids referring to Christianity as an African religion, speaking instead of ‘Christianity as an African’s religion’, in the sense that Christianity is ‘fully coherent with the religious quests in

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<sup>80</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 53.

African life’ as Africans comprehend it in their own heart language. Bediako writes that ‘it is through language, and for each person, through their mother tongue, that the Spirit of God speaks to convey divine communication at its deepest to the human community’.<sup>81</sup> Pentecost, he suggests, offers biblical and theological warrant for accepting the transmission of the gospel in the vernacular.<sup>82</sup> In addition to reversing the chaos of Babel, Pentecost even more significantly establishes that ‘God speaks to men and women—in the vernacular. Divine communication is never in a sacred, esoteric, hermetic language; rather it is such that “all of us hear ... in our own languages ... the wonders of God.”’<sup>83</sup>

In Chapter Seven (‘Translatability and the Cultural Incarnations of the Faith’), Bediako makes the assertion that the Christian faith is translatable into every language and culture because of the Incarnation. At the Incarnation, the Word ‘became flesh’, demonstrating the universality of the Christian gospel and the impossibility of holding it captive to a single culture’s ‘translation’. Here Bediako refers to his mentor:

Andrew Walls has taught us to recognise the Christian religion as ‘culturally infinitely translatable.’ From this perspective it becomes possible to see Christianity’s various cycles of expansion into different cultural contexts in its history as so many cultural manifestations or incarnations of the faith.<sup>84</sup>

No one language is the ‘essential’ language for containing God’s Word. Instead, the events of Pentecost demonstrate the universality of both language and culture for transmitting the gospel.<sup>85</sup> Bediako argues that God has revealed the eternal significance

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<sup>81</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 60.

<sup>82</sup> Bediako makes the point that Christianity differs from Islam in this matter, since translation of the Quran plays little if any role in the Islamic mission.

<sup>83</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 60–61.

<sup>84</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 109.

<sup>85</sup> Bediako, like many other scholars who write about translation, is ultimately indebted to Lamin Sanneh and Andrew Walls. See Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message, The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990), and Andrew F. Walls, ‘Old Athens and New Jerusalem: Some Signposts for

of all local culture: the Incarnation provides justification, while Pentecost demonstrates that God gives every language the capacity to bear biblical truth. This undermines the charge that Christianity in Africa is just another form of western imperialism. Instead, Bediako can assert that African Christianity is a ‘fresh cultural incarnation of the faith’.<sup>86</sup>

Vernacular language, especially the notion of ‘mother tongue’, is thus critical to Bediako’s understanding of identity. In the post-missionary era, a church that does not have ‘a viable heritage of Christian tradition in its indigenous language’ will not be able to ‘offer an adequate interpretation of reality and a satisfying intellectual framework for African life’, whether to its own members or to those outside the Christian faith.<sup>87</sup>

Reflecting in one’s own language is different than doing so in another language. Consequently, Bediako wants non-Africans to understand how significant it is that Christianity does not assert that the Bible must remain in a particular ‘sacred’ language, as Arabic is for Islam. Every translation of the Christian Bible, in every language, retains its status as the Word of God. This does not negate the fact that the canon of Scripture came down to the church primarily in Hebrew and Greek, with some short passages and words in Aramaic. Richard Haney writes that, for Bediako, language itself has become a theological category in the sense that each language that encounters the Hebrew and Greek of the Old and New Testaments provides new ways of explaining

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Christian Scholarship in the Early History of Mission Studies’, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 21, no. 4 (October 1997): 148–49. Using Lamin Sanneh’s work, Bediako argues in Chapter Seven of *Christianity in Africa* that Africans themselves, rather than the missionaries, were key to the church’s growth in the twentieth century (Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 119). Bediako points out that Sanneh uses the term ‘*missio Dei*’ to describe God’s prior initiative in pre-Christian religious traditions, the historical work of the missionaries, and the evangelistic efforts of indigenous believers. African Christianity is the result of God’s work there (*Christianity in Africa*, 122).

<sup>86</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 122.

<sup>87</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 61. We will see the working out of this point in Chapter Five, which looks at Bediako’s use of the word *Nana*, where the lexical range of the Twi provides him with a category larger than mere ‘ancestor’—the normal English translation—for constructing an Akan Christology.

biblical truth not available to other languages. According to Richard Haney, ‘Bediako argues that translation is more than merely linguistic; it gives birth to “new idioms and categories of thought” as a vernacular encounters the word of the Scriptures. These categories and idioms can be new expressions of biblical truth and can therefore illuminate Scripture in new ways’.<sup>88</sup>

As the following illustration will demonstrate, Bediako recognizes that it is the Twi translation of a Greek text—not a Twi translation in place of the Greek text—that opens up interpretive possibilities. The Greek and Hebrew texts remain the *textus receptus* of divine revelation.<sup>89</sup> That said, Bediako highlights the power of vernacular translations to illuminate the gospel by describing his experience while using a Twi Bible to lead a study on Heb 1:3 during the *Odwira* festival. *Odwira* is an Akan new year’s festival that involves rites of purification and reconciliation.<sup>90</sup> Its name is derived from the verb *dwiraa* (to wash, to cleanse, or to purify).<sup>91</sup> As Bediako observed, the Twi version of Heb 1:3 uses *dwiraa* to translate καθαρισμὸν in the phrase καθαρισμὸν τοῦ μαρτιῶν ποιησάμενος. *Dwiraa* in Twi always requires an explicit indirect object (which is a variant reading in the Greek), so its use here makes crystal clear that our forgiveness comes through Jesus Christ alone. Furthermore, an Akan Christian reading

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<sup>88</sup> Richard L. Haney, ‘Mapping Mission as Translation with Reference to Michael Polanyi’s Heuristic Philosophy’ (PhD diss., Middlesex University, 2014), 136. Haney quotes Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 439.

<sup>89</sup> Every Bible—even the Greek New Testament, insofar as Jesus’ original sayings were in Aramaic—is a translation. The Old Testament too, considering that it was composed over many centuries if not millennia, did not reach its final written form until the time of the Massoretes, almost a thousand years after Christ. While not technically a translation, a text that reaches its final written form two and a half millennia after its time of composition will reflect lexical-range changes.

<sup>90</sup> See Frank Kwesi Adams, *Odwira and the Gospel* (Oxford: Regnum, 2010). Adams argues that ‘the religious values embedded in the Odwira have survived over the centuries and give meaning to Asante religious and political life which cannot be understood without appropriating the meaning of the Odwira. This study will focus on discovering the nature of the Odwira festival as a key to exploring Asante culture, and the ways in which the Christian faith may engage with it’ (3).

<sup>91</sup> Adams, *Odwira and the Gospel*, 4.

Hebrews 1 could not help but think of the *Odwira* festival itself and see it ‘converted’ in the text.

Reading Heb 1:3 in Twi gave these Ghanaian Christians a way to see Jesus and his atoning work through the lens of their traditional festival. At the same time, their study revealed a power-encounter between the heart of the gospel, Jesus, and the heart of the traditional festival, which Bediako notes is centred on ancestors. This could make for a messy Bible study, since people’s experiences and understandings varied. Yet, Bediako concludes,

The vernacular Scriptures became the means of gaining a further insight into the traditional culture, whilst the meaning of the Scriptures was also illuminated in a new way, in relation to a vital aspect of the traditional culture. ... and in the profound relating of Christ to the living forces of the traditional religion there would also be a power-encounter since the traditional religion, centred at its most vital points on ancestors, was at heart about power. ... there was a shared awareness that the study, through the vernacular, had led to firm ground which was *within* the purview of the traditional culture: Christ had a stake in the spiritual universe of traditional religion.<sup>92</sup>

Bediako argues, then, that African theologians should use Scriptures in the vernacular—which ‘assumes the weight of a culture’—in order to ‘hear and perceive’ the gospel as the majority of African Christians do. Not only will this allow their theological ‘goals, methods, and interests’ to be shaped by the real needs of African Christians, it will also allow western Christian traditions to be heard without necessarily becoming normative in Africa. This, in turn, will allow Africans to make ecumenical contributions as co-equals. Bediako does not go so far as to say that Africans must write in their first language, but he does argue that when they write, in whatever language, they should do so on the basis of their interaction with Scripture in their first language.

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<sup>92</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 71–72. See also Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture (A Ghanaian Perspective)* (Accra: Asempa, 1990), 45.

This, he asserts, will help them bring their own identity-given insights to the table and share them with the global church on an even footing.

Bediako agrees with Sri Lankan theologian Aloysius Pieris that ‘language is our experience of reality’, while ‘religion is its expression’.<sup>93</sup> In language—words, syntax, lexical horizons, and the like—we find the tools to reference our experience of reality; in religion we develop a way to live in and interact with that reality. African languages thus reflect the African world with its sharp and nuanced awareness of God, divinities, spirits, ancestors, and natural forces that are not God, and give speakers an ability to differentiate who is God and who is not. Further, their language gives them an ability to connect their experience of God in their pre-Christian religio-culture with what they now experience as Christians. Bediako goes on to locate his argument for the ability of any and all languages to express the truth of the gospel in the eschatological religio-culture of the new heaven and earth, where people from every tongue, tribe, and nation will praise the one true God in their heart languages. ‘Thus’, Bediako writes, ‘primal religious traditions have theological significance, since God is known and named in them, a clear anticipation of true “globalisation” yet to be—“the multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, before the throne and in front of the Lamb.” (Rev. 7:9)’. Bediako then draws the obvious conclusion: ‘this means that any secular globalization that seeks to eliminate so-called “tribal” languages in favour of so-called “world” languages is a parody, and is on collision course with the mind and will of God’.<sup>94</sup>

In all of this Bediako learned from those he saw as teachers of the current African church: the Church Fathers (specifically Tatian, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and

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<sup>93</sup> Kwame Bediako, ‘Why Has the Summer Ended’, 7.

<sup>94</sup> Bediako, ‘Why Has the Summer Ended’, 7.



Justin Martyr) who used Greek and Latin words that had no history in the Hebrew world of the Old Testament but long lexical histories in the Hellenistic world to translate biblical revelation. Bediako discusses the work of these second-century Church Fathers as an analogue to the process he sees taking place in Africa, namely, ‘the shaping of Christian affirmation in the new cultural contexts and cultural idioms of Africa in which biblical faith is now beginning to be expressed’.<sup>95</sup>

Bediako envisions a more accurate rendering of the Christian experience of Christ, and a more universal one in the sense that it now reflects the best that every tongue, tribe and nation can offer one another. On this basis, he argues that the translatability of the gospel not only allows but actively encourages the rendering of biblical revelation in words that reflect the primal cultural experiences of every people. Bediako is aware, of course, that anything new that emerges through this process will have to be judged against the standard of the ‘the tradition of the community of faith, to ensure that the result is recognizable and owned by the world Christian community’.<sup>96</sup> He sees the church gaining new insights, not new doctrines—new languages do not draw new pictures, they add shades of colour to the picture revealed in Scripture. According to Bediako, ‘since we are dealing with a translatable faith and translated Scriptures, mother tongues, new languages, and the potential for new idioms become

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<sup>95</sup> Kwame Bediako, ‘The Doctrine of Christ and the Significance of Vernacular Terminology’, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 22, no. 3 (July 1998): 111. In *Theology and Identity*, Bediako argues that these Church Fathers worked to understand the gospel within the language and culture that formed their identities. This enabled them to receive the gospel not as a foreign religion but as one they could embrace as a key to the world they had grown up in and understood. For Africans and Christians everywhere, then, ‘the early Church Fathers of the second century are truly our masters. They made the gospel their own to such an extent that it became for them a key to interpret the religious meanings inherent in their heritage, so that they could decide what to accept and what to reject. The gospel was for them also an all-encompassing reality and principle of integration that enabled them to understand themselves and their past and to face the future, because the gospel of Jesus Christ became for them the heir to all that was worthy in the past, while it held all the potential of the future.’ Bediako, ‘Doctrine of Christ’, 111. This quote summarizes Bediako’s magisterial work, *Theology and Identity*.

<sup>96</sup> Bediako, ‘Doctrine of Christ’, 110–11.

central and are crucial in opening up fresh insights into our common understanding of the doctrine of Christ'.<sup>97</sup> While the church may have forgotten or begun to take for granted the remarkable translation work of the modern missionary movement—work Bediako calls a 'major event' in modern church history—he wants to emphasize that this work and the multitude of new languages and idioms now available to the global church are gifts of God to be embraced.<sup>98</sup>

Bediako draws his ultimate conclusion in a 2003 article titled 'Biblical Exegesis in the African Context: The Factor and Impact of the Translated Scriptures': we have not exhaustively exegeted a text until we have understood the possible translations of a text from the many mother tongues of the human family.<sup>99</sup> The result of this grand translation project, he writes, will be 'new expressions of biblical truth' that will 'illuminate the Scriptures in new ways'.<sup>100</sup> Here, again, Bediako roots his argument in the Incarnation, through which God translated himself into human flesh and language. It follows, Bediako asserts, that theology as expressed within the categories of a Hellenistic world view cannot be the last word on the subject. The Church Fathers themselves, he argues, took the biblical record and translated it into language derived from their own cultural identities, never intending their statements of doctrine to be considered timeless.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Bediako, 'Doctrine of Christ', 110–11. This is not the place for an extended discussion of 'translatability', but we can note that Bediako is building on the work of both Lamin Sanneh and Andrew Walls. See Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990); Walls, 'Old Athens and New Jerusalem', 148–49. Haney also discusses Walls, Sanneh and Kwame Bediako in the context of mission as translation ('Mapping Mission as Translation').

<sup>98</sup> Bediako, 'Doctrine of Christ', 111.

<sup>99</sup> Kwame Bediako, 'Biblical Exegesis in the African Context: The Factor and Impact of the Translated Scriptures', *Journal of African Christian Thought* 6, no. 1 (June 2003): 15–23.

<sup>100</sup> Bediako, 'Biblical Exegesis in the African Context', 17.

<sup>101</sup> Bediako, 'Biblical Exegesis in the African Context', 17.

In summary, Bediako argues that the miracle at Pentecost demonstrated a simple truth: God has made every vernacular language sufficient to carry his truth—a fact driven home by the promise that in the new heaven and earth people from every ‘tongue, tribe, and nation’ will praise God in their own mother tongues. As an Akan Christian, Bediako knows that the Twi language is as good as English or any other European language at containing and transmitting the gospel. Indeed, to read the Bible only in the language of others would be to risk missing out on some of the nuances and richness of God’s Word that might only be available in Twi. We can also say that, because Twi reflects the richness of the robust Akan single-tiered religio-culture—an understanding that uses a map of the universe that is far closer than the western perspective to the biblical world map—Akan theologians stand ready to make significant contributions to the theological conversation in today’s global church.<sup>102</sup> With that, we are now ready to consider Bediako’s understanding of identity as a new theological category in African Christian theology.

## **6. KWAME BEDIAKO’S UNDERSTANDING AND THREE-FOLD USE OF IDENTITY**

Bediako uses the term ‘identity’ in three interlocking ways: as a theological category, as a theological method or methodology, and as a hermeneutical key for understanding African Christian theology.<sup>103</sup> It should be noted, however, that there is something

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<sup>102</sup> We will look at two of these in Chapters Four and Five.

<sup>103</sup> Timothy Hartman has asked whether Bediako’s observation applies disproportionately to the first generation of African Christian scholars whom Bediako studied in *Theology and Identity*. Timothy Hartman, ‘Revelation, Religion, and Culture in Kwame Bediako and Karl Barth’ (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 2014). There is merit to Hartman’s observation, but an appreciation of the rootedness in the single-tiered unitive perspective of African religio-culture that characterizes the identity Bediako was discussing suggests that identity continues to serve as a theological category and hermeneutical key in the reading and understanding of African Christian theology. (I am indebted to Dr. Hartman, who was kind enough to share the manuscript of his unpublished dissertation with me for my research.)

artificial in looking at these three uses separately. In Bediako's thinking, they form a kind of perichoretic whole, interlocking in such a way as to be, finally, inseparable.

### 6.1 Identity as a Theological Category

Bediako uses the word 'identity' to describe who people are as they come to understand themselves within the world they take to be real. As an Akan, Bediako argues, his own identity emerges out of Africa's primal spiritual universe—a universe that is still operative for African Christians. His identity is thus formed by the single-tiered primal universe and its ontological understanding of reality, re-formed and conformed to the gospel.<sup>104</sup> It is this new identity which becomes, for Bediako, a theological category.

Bediako worked out the importance of identity in his monumental work, *Theology and Identity*, by describing how the Church Fathers, Tatian, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Justin Martyr found a way 'to make their Christian self-consciousness feel at home within' their Graeco-Roman cultural heritage, 'whilst their identity remained tied to and primarily shaped by a "doctrine which was originally barbarian"'.<sup>105</sup> These Church Fathers became, in Bediako's opinion, 'masters' who showed African Christian theologians how to feel at home in the religio-cultures of Africa as the Christian gospel itself became for them 'an intellectual and historical category in its own right'.<sup>106</sup> The gospel as a category produced in the life of new African believers an identity refined by the gospel but still rooted in their own ontological past. Because the gospel supplied them with 'an all-encompassing reality

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<sup>104</sup> This is Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu's understanding of Bediako's project: '[Bediako] argued for the creation of a distinctively African Christian identity through a positive apprehension and engagement with primal worldviews which he considered to be the substructure upon which Christianity itself had been built even in the former heartlands of the faith in the West.' Asamoah-Gyadu, 'Bediako of Africa', 14.

<sup>105</sup> Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 32. 'Barbarian' was Celsus's taunt against Christians as quoted by Origen in *Contra Celsum*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 4 (Peabody, Hendrickson, 1995) 397.

<sup>106</sup> Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 73.

and an overall integrating principle', they were able to 'understand themselves and their past, and face the future, because the Gospel of Jesus Christ became for them the heir to all that was worthy in the past, whilst it held all the potential for the future'.<sup>107</sup>

The example of the Church Fathers provided contemporary African scholars with a road map 'for discerning the religious meanings inherent in their heritage, so that they could decide what to accept and what to reject'.<sup>108</sup> Their example also gave contemporary Africans the confidence to draw upon categories emerging from their identity—whether those categories appeared in Scripture or not—just as the Fathers did. In other words, Bediako's identity, formed by his Akan religio-culture, became a category that provided him with other categories with which to work out an understanding of the gospel that were not available to others in the global church. As an Akan, this identity category was inescapably forged in the single-tiered interpretive understanding of reality. This understanding, foundational to what Bediako calls Africa's 'primal spiritual universe', is rich in categories that can be used to articulate a thoroughly biblical African Christian theology.

Bediako illustrates how identity operates as a theological category with his account of the courage of the Christians in Akim Tafo who violated a two week ban on playing drums leading up to a traditional religious festival on the grounds that drums were an 'essential part of the Ghanaian form of worship'.<sup>109</sup> Bediako says that their action expressed their faith through their Ghanaian identity. The conflict was not a matter of two religions confronting one another so much as it highlighted how a single people, some of whom were Christians and some of whom followed traditional Akan

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<sup>107</sup> Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 73.

<sup>108</sup> Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 73.

<sup>109</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture*, 31.

religion, needed to use drums if they are going to engage in authentic *Ghanaian* worship. Both groups valued worship, and both groups naturally used drums in worship. Under the circumstances, the Christians would be hard pressed to worship at all without drums, ‘even though it might be in violation of a traditional religious ban’.<sup>110</sup>

Bediako argues that the gospel elevates drumming to a place where it expresses in one of the deepest ways a Ghanaian can respond as a Christian to God’s grace. Their religio-cultural identity has been used to offer up genuine, African worship, and their new identity in Jesus Christ is lived out within the context of their pre-Christian religio-culture, in which drumming was a natural way to express their faith in worship. Bediako sees a clear parallel between the responses of the Church Fathers and the Christians in Akim Tafo when confronted with similar challenges. God’s grace confronted them not as Jews or Greeks, Akan or European, but as people graciously created and loved by God. It also gave them a completed identity ‘ultimately rooted in God and Christ’.<sup>111</sup> For the church in Akim Tafo, the gospel provided the interpretive key for discerning that drumming, which they learned from their traditional Akan religio-culture, was both adequate and necessary to express their gratitude to God for his grace.<sup>112</sup> Bediako concludes that our ultimate identity as Christians is never in culture—how could any one culture serve that function?—but in Christ, who is able to choose, purify, and use elements from every culture.

Bediako clearly admires the courage of the church in Akim Tafo. I believe, however, that the religio-cultural meaning of drums provides Bediako with a category that he does not fully exploit at this point. I have already stated that Bediako was not

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<sup>110</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture*, 32.

<sup>111</sup> Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 441.

<sup>112</sup> See Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, 73 (quoted above).

always attuned to the tacit operation of the single-tiered unitive perspective, and here is one such instance. Applying the single-tiered interpretive tool to the use of drums within Akan religio-culture uncovers their revelatory power and function in African traditional religions.

Within the religious consciousness of the Akim Tafo church drums are a means for both communicating with and hearing from God. George Niangoran-Bouah notes that the drum is the means of mediation with the sacred—the Supreme Being, the deities, the ancestors, and spirits who are known through the myths, legends, ceremonies, rituals, and cult objects of traditional religions.<sup>113</sup> By noting this integral connection between the drum and the single-tiered unitive cosmology, Niangoran-Bouah goes beyond what Bediako articulated to offer an understanding of how this religio-cultural category serves the believers of Akim Tafo. Drums, in the context of the single-tiered interpretive landscape, have the power to communicate beyond the mere resonance of a vibrating drum head. Niangoran-Bouah uses two creation narratives, both of which make the point that God is the creator of the drum, to establish that the origin of the drum goes back to the beginning of time. The drum is an ‘animated being endowed with a vital force and a spiritual principle’.<sup>114</sup> As such, the drum can ‘speak’, and because the drum is sacred, ‘it is used in communication with God, with local deities, with cosmic deities (sun, earth, moon, Venus), with the ancestors, and with the spirits during important events’.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> George Niangoran-Bouah, ‘The Talking Drum: A Traditional African Instrument of Liturgy and of Mediation with the Sacred’, in *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society*, ed. Jacob K. Olupona (St. Paul: Paragon, 1991), 82.

<sup>114</sup> Niangoran-Bouah, ‘Talking Drum’, 86.

<sup>115</sup> Niangoran-Bouah, ‘Talking Drum’, 86. Cf. George Niangoran-Bouah, *Introduction à la Drummologie* (Abidjan: Université Côte d’Ivoire Institut de l’Ethno-sociologie, 1980).

A drum has a memory, which is ‘dug out’ of the instrument. Once set, the language of the drum (approved by chief and elders) cannot be changed, because to change that language would undo its power, rendering the message meaningless. Among the Akan, drummers who altered texts were subject to death.<sup>116</sup> The gospel, of course, modifies this teaching, but the church in Akim Tafo could find in their drums a ‘landing place’ for the Christian doctrine that God has revealed himself to humanity in an unchangeable Word.<sup>117</sup> Niangoran-Bouah points out that while Jews and Muslims refer to their Holy Scriptures, the Akan used the ‘talking drum’ to reference the sacred. He further observes that ‘the discourse of the drum, unchangeable and conventional, is not a discourse of an isolated wise man, but a real ideology of several thousand years which the memory of a whole people preserves with piety from generation to generation’.<sup>118</sup> Niangoran-Bouah’s analysis of the role and power of drums helps us to understand that the drums of the Akim Tafo church reflect their identity in this deepest of sacred places. The church in Akim Tafo used drums not only as an act of courage, but because drums spoke to and for them of God. As the gospel discerned for them what could be kept from their pre-Christian identity, the drums, without ever taking the place of Scripture, could continue as a means with which they could speak to God and hear

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<sup>116</sup> Robert Fisher observes how the lore of the tribe is handed down from one generation of drummer to the next. ‘While the drummer puts his heart and soul into his work, he only carries out the basic traditions of the clan and society. He receives his texts from his fathers, and they from the ancestors. He arouses the collective imagination to the heights of the grandeur and the heroism of the ancestors. He signs when he finishes with the genealogy of drummers and in his own name. The text is therefore sacred. ... One may claim, therefore, that African Traditional Religions are religions of a book of a different sort, one not handwritten or printed but recorded in the oral traditions and the memory of the ethnic group.’ Robert B. Fisher, *West African Religious Traditions: Focus on the Akan of Ghana* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998), 35.

<sup>117</sup> In Chapter Four I will discuss the idea of ‘analogical continuity’, which highlights the presence of analogical ‘landing places’ for certain elements of biblical revelation in Africa’s traditional religions. Drums are one of these ‘landing places’ for divine revelation coming now through the Bible.

<sup>118</sup> Niangoran-Bouah, ‘Talking Drum’, 92.



God speak to them of his grace. For these Christians, the revelatory power of drums is now a joyful servant of God's Word.

## 6.2 Identity as Methodology

The next area to examine is Bediako's use of identity as a theological methodology. I have already suggested that Bediako's three-fold use of identity must, in the final analysis, be considered as one. The three senses of identity he discusses are more like facets of a single diamond than three separate diamonds; as facets, each is able to refract slightly different colours. While identity is, on the one hand, a category that supplies Bediako with new categories with which to express his understanding of the Christian faith, this very process—discovering new categories and then deciding on the basis of the gospel the degree to which they can be used—becomes part of his overall theological methodology.

Bediako understood that much of the scholarship on traditional African religions that was available to him and his fellow scholars came from social anthropologists.<sup>119</sup> He insisted, however, that 'African theology's investigations into African primal religions are qualitatively different from the observations of anthropologists'.<sup>120</sup> Once this is acknowledged, Bediako wrote,

it becomes possible to appreciate how, by its fundamental motivation, African theology may have been charting a new course in theological method. It is not that this course has no parallel in the totality of Christian scholarship, for the categories were being derived from Christian tradition as much as from African experience and realm of ideas. Rather, this new

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<sup>119</sup> Nineteenth-century anthropological studies, dependent as they were on second-hand understandings of the African context and evolutionary assumptions about the progress of religion, led almost inevitably to the conclusion of the 1910 Edinburgh Conference that Africa offered nothing of value in religion and could be considered a *tabula rasa*.

<sup>120</sup> Bediako, 'Understanding African Christian Theology', 16.

theological approach had no counterpart in them or recent Western theological thought forged within the context of Christendom.<sup>121</sup>

Bediako argued that while western Christian thought derived its categories from Christendom, African scholars were embarking on a new method not seen since the time of the Church Fathers.

At the heart of the new theological method would be the issue of identity, which would itself be perceived as a theological category, and which therefore entailed confronting constantly the question as to how, and how far, the 'old' and the 'new' in African religious consciousness could become integrated into a unified vision of what it meant to be African *and* Christian.<sup>122</sup>

As we have seen, Bediako understood that this quest was deeply personal for his generation as they made identity the locus of their work.

As African Christian scholars use both the categories of classic Christian theology and new categories made available to them by their African identities, adopting this new methodology was like moving from monaural to stereo format.<sup>123</sup> Bediako understands methodology to be about asking the right questions as they are generated through the interaction of the gospel and a person's identity. For the Christian theologian, however, two identities exist and must be integrated. That integration happens, Bediako insists, when 'certain problems assume a priority of a group of writers' who, using their Christian faith, examine and question their religio-cultural identity.<sup>124</sup> In Chapters Five and Six, for example, we will look at how Akan scholars use categories emerging from

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<sup>121</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, 53.

<sup>122</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, 53.

<sup>123</sup> This is, of course, precisely what Bediako understood the Church Fathers to be doing as they brought their Greco-Roman identities into the conversation with a Bible emerging out of a Jewish, Middle Eastern context.

<sup>124</sup> Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, xv. Ogbu Kalu's definition of theological methodology as 'the questions asked and how they are answered' ('Daughters of Ethiopia: Constructing a Feminist Discourse', 265) tracks nicely with Bediako's work. This is a helpful note to keep in mind when speaking of 'identity' as methodology: the African identity is crucial in determining which questions to ask versus others and then how they are answered.

their identities to understand with greater precision what the Bible teaches about the person and work of Jesus on the one hand, and what it means to be fully human on the other.

Bediako insists that a methodology rooted in African identity is important because Christianity had not reached any kind of ultimate cultural formulation in the Christianity of Europe and North America. Further, he argues, a final formulation is impossible. Working from an assumption of the translatability of the Christian faith into every cultural identity, Bediako offers the following description of African theologians' work:

Even though Africa's theologians would make use of categories of description inherited from the Western Christian theological tradition, they were obviously setting themselves to give to the African pre-Christian religious heritage an interpretation which the European missionary understanding of Africa was, on the whole, unable to achieve. The real significance of modern African theological writing lies in the attitude that is taken towards the African religious past.<sup>125</sup>

### **6.3 Hermeneutic of Identity or Identity as the Hermeneutical Key<sup>126</sup>**

If Bediako's Akan identity provides him with categories for understanding the gospel that are unavailable to western theologians, and if this discovery of new categories represents a methodology rarely seen in western Christianity since the Church Fathers, then understanding the role of identity becomes a hermeneutical key for analysing theology coming out of Africa today. Again, this is because theology is 'called to deal always with culturally-rooted questions'.<sup>127</sup> As I have tried to show, however, those questions are not just 'culturally-rooted', but *religio*-culturally rooted because they

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<sup>125</sup> Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, xv, 7.

<sup>126</sup> Bediako uses this phrase in section headings in two articles (though not in the body of the texts themselves): 'Types of African Theology' and 'Understanding African Theology'. In another article, 'The Roots of African Theology', 58–64, Bediako uses the heading, 'African Theology: Identity as the Hermeneutical Key'. The phrase does appear in *Theology and Identity*, 426–427. See also Bediako, 'Epilogue', 243–54.

<sup>127</sup> Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, xv.

emerge from an identity inescapably shaped by a single-tiered understanding of reality. This is the structure of the world Bediako finds in both his primal African (ontological) past and his new-found Christian faith.

Bediako is not arguing that other articulations of biblical truth are to be jettisoned as false. Nor is he arguing that Africa's contribution is superior. Rather, he is arguing that the global church will understand in the broadest way possible the richness and glory of the one true God when it attends to understandings of biblical revelation emerging from a multitude of (religio-)cultural identities and languages they use to translate the Scriptures. Bediako makes this point in particular in an article entitled, 'Biblical Exegesis in the African Context: The Factor and Impact of the Translated Scriptures'.<sup>128</sup> He asserts two things. First, by accepting that God's truth is translatable, we are able to go deeper into Scripture and understand its multi-faceted beauty in ways never before realized, for

by encouraging a meeting of the various 'prophecies' produced by the same Spirit in several languages, it can lead to the achievement of a fuller sense and understanding of the Scriptures. Since different languages have different capacities, this result is possible only if biblical exegetes from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds are open to learning from one another'.<sup>129</sup>

Second—and in Bediako's opinion more importantly, by recognizing that God has revealed himself to us in a Word that is infinitely translatable, that Word—now in English, now in Twi—has the potential to help the church know and understand the God who has revealed himself to us in the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts of Scripture through the use of categories uniquely capable of translating the meaning of the original autographs. The original autographs are still uniquely authoritative, but

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<sup>128</sup> Bediako, 'Biblical Exegesis in the African Context', 15–23.

<sup>129</sup> Bediako, 'Biblical Exegesis in the African Context', 22.

their infinite translatability into the languages of every tongue, tribe, and nation opens rich new insights into those autographs.

In *Theology and Identity*, Bediako shows how the insights and achievements of the first two centuries of the church serve as an analogue—as opposed to a model to be meticulously followed—for theologians working in Africa today. In Part One of the book, he examines four patristic authors: Tatian, Tertullian, Justin, and Clement of Alexandria. In Part Two, he discusses the rise of the modern African church and four African Christian theologians: E. Bolaji Idowu, John S. Mbiti (who was similar to Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria), Mulago gwa Cikala Musharhamina (representing a Roman Catholic position), and Byang Kato (representing the strictest ‘biblical’ position, and thus comparable to a modern Tertullian). Bediako understands ‘the two different cultural and historical contexts’ of the eight writers he considers and demonstrates the critical role of their particular identities, Greco-Roman and African, in their theological work. He writes:

The question of identity with its significance for the development of theological self-consciousness, constitutes a shared presumption of the formative phase of Hellenistic Christian thought in the second century AD on the one hand, and the early flowering of Christian theology in the post-missionary Church in twentieth-century Africa on the other. According to this argument, *the question of identity constitutes a “hermeneutical key”* which, by granting access to the kind of concerns exhibited by Christian writers in the two contexts, leads to a deeper understanding of the modern situation in particular, and shows how the modern context manifests features which are identifiable elsewhere in Christian history.<sup>130</sup>

Bediako recognizes that a problem arises as African Christian theologians make threefold use of ‘identity’ as a category, a methodology for discovering landing places, and a hermeneutical key: are there elements emerging from Africa’s single-tiered religio-culture that work against the truth of the gospel? Bediako understands that there

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<sup>130</sup> Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 426–27; italics added.

is a question as to which elements from Africa's religious past can be integrated into an African iteration of the gospel. Particularly in his reading of Bolaji Idowu,<sup>131</sup> and spurred on by Byang Kato's critique, he addresses the need to be critical of those elements within Africa's traditional religions which are incompatible with Christian faith. He also observes that, aside from Kato, the first generation of African Christian scholars did not fully deliver this necessary critique. He suggests two reasons for this. First, they were reacting against the hyper-criticism of Africa's traditional religions by ethnocentric European missionaries and critics; second, it was simply a methodological deficiency in their approach.

Focusing on the methodological issue, he notes that while the Church Fathers he discussed in *Theology and Identity* found within their own cultural history—and thus their own pre-Christian identity—a sophisticated intellectual critique against their old religion, Africa's first-generation Christian theologians had no comparable tradition to draw upon. The only Christian critique available to them was the culture-deaf response of ethnocentric colonialism which, in the spirit of the 1910 Edinburgh Conference, saw nothing of value in Africa's primal religions. This was the attitude that Bediako found, and severely criticized, in the work of Byang Kato. Bediako was astute enough, however, to recognize that Kato was mounting a necessary 'Tertullianic' critique of Africa's traditional religions. Bediako writes:

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<sup>131</sup> In 'Understanding African Christian Theology in the 20th Century', Bediako discusses Idowu as a proponent of 'radical continuity'. Idowu argued that the God accepted and believed by African primal religions was identical to the God revealed in Scripture. Consequently, what was needed in Africa was a 'radical indigenization of the Church, on the grounds that the church in Africa, as a result of its peculiar historical connection with Western cultural dominance, was failing to develop its own theology, churchmanship, liturgy, or even discipline'. According to Idowu, the remedy for this situation was for 'the African church ... to build its bridges to the "revelation" given to Africans in their pre-Christian and pre-missionary religious traditions of the past'. The result, however in Bediako's opinion, was that 'African Christian experience emerged as not much more than a refinement of the experience of the "old" religion', and the vindication and the affirmation of African selfhood, which, at the start, had been conceived as the task of the church, later came to be entrusted to the revitalization of the 'old' religions with their 'God-given heritage of indigenous spiritual and cultural treasures'. In other words, what did Christianity have to offer that was necessary? Bediako, 'Understanding African Christian Theology', 16.

Unlike the Fathers who inherited from their pre-Christian background a tradition of intellectual critique of the old religion which was thus affirmative of their cultural identity, Africa's theologians received a critique, which by being extraneous and Eurocentric, could only be alienating for them and destructive of the very concept of an African theology of synthesis. Here the weakness noted in the theological outlook of Byang Kato finds its deepest significance. ... In the process, it may be that the patristic experiments in the early centuries of the Christian movement will find a more prominent place in the consciousness of Africa's theologians, and the 'Tertullianic' tendency that Byang Kato represented may need to be taken more seriously, even if his own solution was far from adequate.<sup>132</sup>

Bediako notes that the African theologians who most closely follow the methodological approach of the Church Fathers fail to marshal the support of those same Fathers to take their own work further—with the exception of Byang Kato, whom Bediako sees as a modern Tertullian. Bediako argues that is a mistake, for by failing to use the critical methodology found in the writings of the Fathers, they forfeited the best analogue for constructing a critical methodology in their own work. This has led, in Bediako's opinion, to African Christian theology quickly and unnecessarily ceding an appraisal of the African pre-Christian heritage to practitioners of social anthropology who use the methodology and criteria of the social sciences rather than those of theology.

Theology's properly theological concern with the African pre-Christian heritage has tended to be assessed by the criteria of social anthropology, and so has been generally misunderstood. It is, however, the history of Christian theological thought, and the early patristic phase of that history in particular, which most adequately clarifies its intuitions and illuminates its insights.<sup>133</sup>

So it is that Bediako argues strenuously for the right of African Christian scholars to operate fully out of their own *African* identity as theologians. This unique identity, shaped by both Africa's primal ontological past and the gospel, gives African Christian

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<sup>132</sup> Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 437.

<sup>133</sup> Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 438.

theologians something original to say to the global Christian community. Bediako argues that both colonial missionaries and western scholars failed to understand what Africa's primal past had to offer because they imposed their values on what they saw and heard in Africa, leading to assessments that underestimated Africa's 'knowledge and sense of God'. They also failed to appreciate

the unavoidable element of Africa's continuing primal religions, not as the remnants of an outworn "primitive mentality", but, *in terms of their world-view*, as living realities in the experience of vast numbers of African Christians in all the churches, and not only in the so-called Independent churches; and the intellectual struggle for, and "feeling after", a theological method in a field of enquiry which had hitherto been charted largely by Western anthropological scholarship, and in terminology relating to Africa which would often be "unacceptable" to Africans.<sup>134</sup>

By using the phrase 'hermeneutic of identity' to describe this new African theological methodology,<sup>135</sup> Bediako argues that African scholars' understanding of reality, inseparable from who they are, is a fruitful interpretive key in thinking through and writing African Christian theologies.

## 7. CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

A critical assessment of Bediako's claims concerning identity as a theological category, methodology, and hermeneutical key raises several questions.

The first and perhaps most important question is to what degree Bediako's post-secondary training, the majority of which took place in the West, affected his own identity. How was Bediako affected by his exposure first to French culture in Bordeaux and later to English and Scottish culture at the London Bible College and Aberdeen, and

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<sup>134</sup> Bediako, 'Types of African Theology', 59; italics added.

<sup>135</sup> Bediako uses this phrase for section headings in 'Understanding African Christian Theology in the 20th Century' though not in the body of the text.



later during his frequent trips to lecture and teach in Edinburgh?<sup>136</sup> Bediako always returned to Ghana, and eventually centred his work at the Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission, and Culture, which he founded, but the question of how deeply his exposure to western culture and education affected his identity lingers.<sup>137</sup> At the same time, is it possible that Bediako's experience serves as a model for how scholars might express their identities within the fluid, global theological and ecclesiastical realities of the twenty-first century? Bediako's exposure to a wider theological context—and to cultures that were not religio-cultures (if such is possible) – certainly highlighted for him the distinctive features of an identity shaped by Akan religio-culture and the contributions it could offer to the wider Christian community. In this sense, Bediako was himself an observer of the tacit.

A second question relates to clarity. Bediako argues that identity is a new theological category for African Christian theology, but the meaning of this assertion does not become clear until we add to it his thinking on identity as methodology and hermeneutical key. The three uses of identity inform each other, and Bediako's meaning remains ambiguous unless they are considered as parts of a whole. Bediako himself, however, did not clearly articulate this.

Finally, Bediako confronted, the dangers that a theology rooted in identity might present, but only in a preliminary way. (We see this perhaps most clearly when Bediako addresses the issue of de-sacralising the Akan category of 'chief' because of the

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<sup>136</sup> I am reminded of a question I once asked a friend, evangelical in his own self-understanding, about what it was like pursuing a seminary degree at a liberal-leaning school. He responded, 'You can't go to the beach without getting a tan'.

<sup>137</sup> This, for example, is Ben Knighton's critique of Bediako in his review of *Jesus of Africa* (*Transformation* 18, no. 1 [January 2001]: 60–62). I believe, however, that Knighton's critique fails to take into account Bediako's essential formation by the single-tiered perspective.

problem that category presented in the person of Kwame Nkrumah.<sup>138</sup>) This, in turn, raises the question of who is to properly judge whether the ‘old’ of the primal spiritual universe has really been eliminated, modified, or adopted by the ‘new’ of the gospel. What happens when primal identities prove resistant to transformation by the gospel? Does identity, in and of itself, provide safeguards against the power of particular clans, tribes, or nations to choose those communities over the community of the Kingdom of God, manifested in the trans-national, trans-tribal church of Jesus Christ? History certainly offers too many examples of tribal loyalties winning out over loyalty to Christ and his church. We see this in the early church, where Paul had to deal exhaustively with the Jewish-Gentile controversy. My own Irish heritage demonstrates the tragedy of choosing tribe (Protestant or Roman Catholic, Irish or Scots Celt) over the Body of Christ. These are never easy issues to deal with, and focusing on identity alone, apart from embedding one’s natal identity within the larger context of a new identity in Jesus Christ, risks tearing the church apart rather than elevating it as a light to the nations. In other words, what Bediako has said about identity is not enough to produce a ‘supernatural’ unity in line with Jesus’ prayer in John 17 or a form of life together in the church that will appear unique in the eyes of the watching world. His discussion of identity, then, has not gone far enough.

## 8. CONCLUSION

The interpretive landscape that flows from the single-tiered understanding of reality holds heart, mind, body, and spirit together, and in this chapter I have shown that theologians conscious of their African identity could not stop until they had produced a

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<sup>138</sup> Bediako addresses this question in Chapter Eight of *Jesus in Africa* and ‘De-sacralization and Democratization: Some Theological Reflections on the Role of Christianity in Nation-Building in Modern Africa’, *Transformation* 12, no. 1 (March 1995): 6. John Pobee addresses the same question in *Religion and Politics in Ghana* (Accra: Asempa, 1991).

fully indigenized theology. In the following chapters, we will explore the various ways in which Kwesi Dickson, John Pobee, Mercy Oduyoye, and other Akan scholars have used their Akan identity to understand and explain the gospel to others. Frank Kwesi Adams's discussion of *Odwira* is a case in point.<sup>139</sup> Adams is very careful in his use of categories emerging from *Odwira*, recognizing that they will not all serve the gospel's purposes. For example, he is very careful in his use of the yam meal eaten with the ancestors: while he acknowledges that this meal may point to the Eucharist, he insists that there is still a significant enough difference between the two to preclude any direct comparison. The danger, as he sees it, is that Jesus' supremacy might be compromised—he therefore warns Christians not to eat food offered to the ancestral spirits. We will have more to say about the limitations of the theological use of identity in the following chapters.

In the next chapter I will introduce a key concept: 'analogical continuity'. As opposed to seeking direct continuity between Africa's traditional religions and the Christian faith, I argue for continuity at the level of a common single-tiered unitive perspective that is foundational to both the world of the Bible and Africa's primal religions. This common foundation then provides analogical landing places for biblical truth within the unitive conceptual landscape of those hearing the gospel for the first time. This, in turn, allows for the formation of an Akan iteration of the Christian faith that can challenge the West's two-tiered iteration and the fact-faith divide seen there.

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<sup>139</sup> I will discuss his work in greater detail in Chapter Four.

## Chapter Four

### Analogical Continuity Emerging from a Single-tiered Unitive Perspective

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I will argue that the single-tiered unitive perspective on reality offers a fresh answer to the question of whether there is continuity between African traditional religions and Christianity.<sup>1</sup> Using the unitive perspective in this way demonstrates its ability to bring interpretive clarity to important theological conversations taking place in Africa today. Additionally, an understanding of the Christian faith developed using the various landing places and bridges coming out of the interpretive landscape of the single-tiered perspective can rightfully challenge the West's two-tiered iteration of the faith and the consequent fact-faith divide.

‘Analogical continuity’ refers to continuity located in the shared single-tiered interpretive landscape that emerges from the unitive perspective on reality found in both the Akan map of the cosmos and the worldview of the Bible. While many scholars attempt to locate continuity between Akan/African traditional religions and the Christian faith, I am suggesting that such efforts miss the deeper level where actual continuity is possible. The type of continuity derived from this deeper level of the single-tiered unitive perspective has been described by African theologians as ‘lines of congruence’, different ‘colouring of the African map of the universe’ (Kalu), ‘bridges’,

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<sup>1</sup> Sandra Greene outlines the controversy between what she calls ‘Devout’ scholars (Mbiti, Idowu, and Parrinder) who believed there was continuity, and the ‘De-Hellenists’ (p’Bitek and Horton) who did not. Sandra Greene, ‘Religion, History and the Supreme Gods of Africa: A Contribution to the Debate’, *Journal of Religion in Africa* 26, no. 2 (1996): 122–38.

‘cultural channels’ (Adams), ‘ideological adjustment’ (Obeng), and ‘sparks in the memory’ (Kato).

The recognition of analogical continuity allows for genuine dialogue between Africa’s traditional religions and Christianity, while at the same time allowing Christianity to be understood not as a foreign imposition but as an African religion that fits with the Akan understanding of reality. It also, however, acknowledges that the bridges identified by this approach are insufficient to capture the entirety of the gospel, and that the similarity between interpretive horizons does not mean they are one and the same. This is critical, because it protects against any collapse of the interpretive horizons of the Bible into the Akan primal universe. Analogical continuity can thus serve as a tool for examining traditional outlooks and determining what can be retained, what must be excluded, and what requires modification.

I introduced the ideas of ‘religio-culture’ and ‘maps of the universe’ in Chapter One. In Chapter Three, I argued that Akan religio-culture emerges from the primal single-tiered interpretive landscape and forms the soil in which Kwame Bediako’s three-fold use of identity grows. In this Chapter, I will use Andrew Walls’s idea of maps of the universe to analyse the importance of the single-tiered unitive perspective in establishing analogical continuity between Akan traditional religion and Christian faith—a continuity that is only possible because the primal Akan understanding of reality and the biblical worldview use a similar map of the universe. Kwame Bediako saw Akan traditional religion as a preparation for the gospel. I will also argue that the preparation for the gospel that Bediako saw in Akan traditional religion exists because both Akan traditional religion and Christianity emerge from the single-tiered interpretive landscape. Consequently, I understand Bediako’s critique of the ethnocentrism of colonial missionaries as essentially a lament. Had those missionaries refrained from imposing their tacit two-tiered rationalism and instead allowed Africans

to work out the gospel in the context of their own single-tiered unitive perspective, the explosive growth of Christianity in Africa could have happened a century earlier.<sup>2</sup>

The issue of continuity is also important because of what C. G. Baeta calls the African Christian tendency to use both ‘braces and belts’.<sup>3</sup> Baeta used this phrase to describe Christians who conform to western practices in their churches but resort to traditional religion for help in the areas of demonic possession, healing, and divination—subjects that western-founded mission churches had difficulty addressing at a deeper level than simple condemnation. However, the same phrase can also describe the pressure on African scholars, particularly in the early years, to conform their professional work to the standards of a two-tiered western ontology while they themselves lived in and accepted the reality of Africa’s single-tiered world. More recent work has demonstrated that the single-tiered perspective produces theologies that have no need of this ‘braces and belts’ approach.

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<sup>2</sup> Emmanuel Larbi would agree. He wrote, ‘Recognition of the malevolent spirit-entities, while at the same time proclaiming the supremacy of the All-Powerful Benevolent Christ, might have produced Christians who, though they would not deny the existence of several evil forces and the effects of their activities on the well-being of man, would set the whole cosmic struggle in the context of the supremacy of Christ. This approach would have affected the world view of the Akan “from the centre”, thereby influencing his entire religious outlook.’ Emmanuel Kingsley Larbi, *Pentecostalism: The Eddies of Ghanaian Christianity* (Accra: Blessed, 2001), 29. Regarding the growth of the church in Africa, the *Atlas of Global Christianity* estimates Africa’s Christian population as 11,663,000 in 1910 and 494,668,000 in 2010. The Pew Trust, in a December 2011 report, estimated 516,470,000 Christians in sub-Saharan Africa in 2010. Todd Johnson and Kenneth R. Ross, eds., *Atlas of Global Christianity 1910–2010* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 110; ‘Global Christianity: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the Christian Population’, Pew Research Center, December 19, 2011, accessed January 9, 2017, <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-regions/>.

<sup>3</sup> Baeta noted, for example, that the martyr Martin Luther Nsibirwa was wearing ‘many pagan amulets’ when he was killed on the step of Namirembe Cathedral in 1944. Christian G. Baeta, ‘Introduction’ to *Christianity in Tropical Africa: Studies Presented and Discussed at the Seventh International African Seminar, University of Ghana, April 1965* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 6. Cf. Kwesi A. Dickson, *Akan Religion and the Christian Faith* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1984), 124–25; Kwesi A. Dickson, *Theology In Africa* (New York: Orbis, 1984), 105; Cephas Omenyo, ‘Agenda for a Discussion of African Initiatives in Christianity: The West African/Ghanaian Case’, *Missiology* 34, no. 3 (July 2011): 382; Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity* (Oxford: Regnum, 1992).

## 2. ANALOGICAL CONTINUITY: RECOGNIZED BY A FEW, MISSED BY MANY

Bediako's lament regarding the ethnocentrism of western missionaries was certainly valid. A few missionaries, however, did recognize that God had been continuously present and active among the African people. In the first quarter of the twentieth century, for example, Edwin Smith recalled a description of the missionary task provided by his friend, a Kasenga blacksmith. As his friend put it,

‘I take ... an old hoe or the remnant of an axe and of it make a new tool. I do not throw the iron away because in its present form it is no longer usable: I fashion it anew into a thing of use and beauty. That is to say, I *semununa* it. I am a refashioner (*usemunuzhi*), and it seems to me that the missionary is trying to do much as I do. He too is a *usemunuzhi*’.

Smith concluded that ‘in his own idiomatic and picturesque way this thoughtful, intelligent pagan was translating our Lord's own view of His mission. I come not to destroy but to fulfil’.<sup>4</sup> I suggest that the ‘iron’ of which the Kasenga blacksmith spoke was the primal or single-tiered understanding of reality.

Edwin Smith was not the only missionary who disagreed with the 1910 Edinburgh Conference in its denial of any basis for the Christian faith in African traditional religions. In his argument that Christianity in Africa should assume an African form and character, Ephraim Mosothoane points to John William Colenso, a nineteenth-century Anglican missionary bishop in South Africa who recognized the continuity between Africa's traditional religions and Christian faith. Mosothoane points out that Colenso argued that Africa needed a class of missionaries who could recognize that all people ‘are recipients of that divine light operated by the Spirit of God which enables them to have some genuine knowledge of God and of his will long before the arrival of the

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<sup>4</sup> Edwin W. Smith, *The Golden Stool: Some Aspects of the Conflict of Cultures in Modern Africa* (London: Holborn, 1926), 261. We might wish today that Smith had found a word other than ‘pagan’ to describe his friend.

missionary’.<sup>5</sup> Colenso argued that ‘among the Zulus, as among other nations, God has not left Himself without witnesses’.<sup>6</sup> For this reason, Colenso used the Zulu word for God, *uNkulunkulu*, rather than some other non-Zulu word.

Mabel Shaw, a twentieth-century missionary to Northern Rhodesia, provides another such example. She wrote the following about her African friends:

The word of God for Africa is not confined within the covers of one book, nor is it to be heard only within the walls of a church. ... They heard Him of old, dim, mysterious, dreadful, an unknown voice: in the falling water, in the great trees God hid Himself. He haunted many places. He hid in the wisdom of the elders. He hid in their laws, in their stories.<sup>7</sup>

In both Colenso and Shaw we see the affirmation that the same God preached by the missionaries had already revealed himself to Africans before their coming. This idea was picked up by other scholars, including those whom we will discuss below.<sup>8</sup>

In 1955, as African Christian theologians and scholars were beginning to assert the importance of an African Christianity not derived from western Christendom, Christian G. Baeta quoted from the Venerable Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* to demonstrate that England itself was once considered primitive, pagan, and without understanding of the Christian God. Bede records that in the year 601 Mellitus was sent to the ‘far-bush’ country of England, to assist Augustine of Canterbury’s evangelistic mission. Furthermore, Bede refers to a letter Mellitus received from Pope Gregory I, containing instructions to build upon the religious

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<sup>5</sup> Ephraim Mosothoane, ‘John William Colenso: Pioneer in the Quest for an Authentic African Christianity’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 44 (1991): 225.

<sup>6</sup> J. W. Colenso, ‘On the Efforts of Missionaries among Savages’, *Journal of the Anthropological Society of London* 3 (1869): 270; quoted in Mosothoane, ‘John William Colenso’, 225.

<sup>7</sup> Mabel Shaw, *God’s Candlelights: An Educational Venture in Northern Rhodesia* (London: Edinburgh House, 1932), 147.

<sup>8</sup> Not everyone agrees that the God revealed in Scripture was present in Africa prior to the missionaries’ arrival. The attendees at the 1910 Edinburgh Conference clearly did not. Smith and Colenso, however, are particularly noteworthy because they do not accept the evolutionary understanding of religion that dominated much of the colonial missionary movement and the scholarly approach to African religion in their day.



traditions of the English pagans, including even their sacrificial rites.<sup>9</sup> Baeta draws particular attention to this last point—that Gregory believed sacrifices once offered in partial knowledge of God could now be offered to the true God as a fitting act of ‘English’ worship.<sup>10</sup> Baeta leaves unspoken the obvious point that what was good for the country which sent so many missionaries to Africa during the colonial period must also be good for Africa.<sup>11</sup>

Emmanuel Milingo, a former Archbishop in the Roman Catholic Church in Zambia, and by the 1980s a controversial figure due to his early advocacy for a robust ministry of healing and exorcism, marshalled the authority of a more recent pope to argue for the existence of a solid, continuous foundation for the Christian gospel within Africa’s pre-Christian traditions. Milingo used Pope Paul VI’s 1967 Apostolic letter *Africae Terrarum* exactly as Baeta used Pope Gregory’s letter to Mellitus.<sup>12</sup> In particular, Milingo points to Paul VI’s recognition of what I call the single-tiered

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<sup>9</sup> According to Bede, Gregory wrote the following: ‘When it shall please Almighty God to bring you unto our most revered brother, Augustine, Bishop, tell him what I have determined after mature deliberation, on the English question: namely, that the temples of the idols in that nation should by no means be destroyed, but let the idols that are in them be destroyed. Let holy water be prepared, and sprinkled in the said temples, let altars be erected and relics placed. For if those temples are well-built, they must be converted from the worship of devils to the service of the true God; that the nation, seeing that their temples are not destroyed, may remove error from their hearts, and, knowing and adoring the true God, may the more familiarly resort to the places to which they have been accustomed. ... No more let them offer beasts to the Devil, but let them kill cattle to the praise of God in their eating and return thanks to the Giver of all things for their sustenance. ... Thus the Lord made himself known to the people of Israel in Egypt: and yet he allowed them the use of sacrifices, which they had been wont to offer to the Devil, in his own worship; so as to command them to kill beasts in sacrifice to him, to the end that, changing their hearts, they might lay aside one part of the sacrifice while they retained another; that whilst they offered the same beasts that they were wont to offer, they should offer them to God, and not to idols—and so they were no longer the same sacrifices.’ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, bk. 1, ch. 30; quoted in Christian G. Baeta, ‘The Challenge of African Culture to the Church, and the Message of the Church to the Church to African Culture’, in *Christianity and African Culture* (Accra: Christian Council of the Gold Coast, 1955), 54–55.

<sup>10</sup> Baeta, ‘Challenge of African Culture’, 55.

<sup>11</sup> What neither Baeta nor Pope Gregory, whom he quotes, addresses is how to understand such sacrifices: were they for atonement, or praise and thanksgiving? The difference is not insignificant.

<sup>12</sup> Paul VI, *Africae Terrarum* (Apostolic Letter, October 29, 1967), *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 59 (1967): 1073–97.

unitive perspective as the locus of continuity between traditional African worldviews and Christianity. In his work titled *Demarcations*, Milingo quotes from Paul VI's letter:

in all traditions of Africa [there is] a sense of the spiritual realities. This sense must not be understood merely as what scholars of the history of religion at the end of the last century used to call animism. It is something different, something deeper, vaster and more universal. *It is the realisation that all created realities, and in particular visible nature itself, are united with the world of invisible and spiritual realities.*<sup>13</sup>

Milingo makes the point that the Church had already established as 'accepted doctrine' that Africa's religious identity was a 'fruitful foundation' for the gospel so that '*the African who is consecrated as a Christian is not forced to renounce his own self, but assumes the ancient values of his people* "in spirit and in truth."<sup>14</sup>

Officially, at least, the Roman Catholic Church did not side with the 1910 Edinburgh Conference. Pope Paul VI's openness to this metaphysical landscape as solid ground on which to construct an African Christianity harmonious with global Roman Catholicism stands in sharp contrast to statements by Protestants such as Dietrich Westermann, who in his 1935 Duff Lecture suggests that missionaries need to be 'ruthless' in opposing traditional religions.<sup>15</sup> On this point, Bediako lines up more with Pope Paul VI than with his own Protestant predecessors. Bediako argues that, in spite of several exceptions to the rule, Protestant missionaries generally followed the line of the 1910 Edinburgh Conference, seeing little of value in Africa's traditional religions.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Emmanuel Milingo, *The World in Between: Christian Healing and the Struggle for Spiritual Survival*, ed. Mona Macmillan (London: Hurst, 1984), 12. *World in Between* draws together a number of Milingo's writings.

<sup>14</sup> Paul VI, *Africae Terrarum*, 1077–80; quoted in Emmanuel Milingo, *The Demarcations* (Lusaka: Teresianum, 1982), 118–19. Milingo's complaint is that the Church's theory has been better than its practice.

<sup>15</sup> Dietrich Westermann, *Africa and Christianity* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), 2.

<sup>16</sup> Bediako frequently mentions this blind spot in the Edinburgh report. See Kwame Bediako, 'The Roots of African Theology', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 13, no. 2 (April 1989): 58; 'Cry Jesus! Christian Theology and Presence in Modern Africa (The Laing Lecture for 1993)', *Vox Evangelica* 23 (1993): 7; 'Understanding African Theology in the 20th Century', *Themelios* 20, no. 1 (October 1994):

Bediako sees change beginning only in the 1960s, with Kenneth Cragg's lectures given at Cambridge University. Cragg argued that Christianity needed to 'harness' the possibilities of Africa's pre-existing religion, and set up within it 'the revolution that will both fulfil and transform it. For if the old is taken away, to whom is the new given?'<sup>17</sup>

The scholarly work of Emmanuel Kingsley Larbi offers a robust promotion of the African primal view as a positive element in Christian theology. Larbi argues that the European missionaries came to Africa from the post-Enlightenment world of rationalism, in which Christianity was linked with civilization, reason, and progress. They were dismissive of the Akan understanding of a world in which spirit powers exercised real influence, so instead of placing Christ at the centre of that world and showing his supremacy and lordship over all such powers, they taught that witches, diviners, and healers were merely exploiting psychological phenomena and should be ignored. Larbi notes that 'the attitude of the missionaries and their African disciples towards the Akan primal world view and Akan culture was one of negation, a denial of the validity of supernatural powers'.<sup>18</sup> He concludes that 'the denial of the existence of the spirit-force (witches, sorcerers, fetishes, magic, charms and the local deities) in the missionary enterprise, radically undermined the work of the missions. In the process,

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14–20; 'Why Has the Summer Ended and We Are Not Saved? Encountering the Real Challenge of Christian Engagement in Primal Contexts', *Journal of African Christian Thought* 11, no. 2 (December 2008): 6; 'Five Theses on the Significance of Modern African Christianity: A Manifesto', *Transformation* 13, no. 1 (January 1998): 22–23; 'Epilogue', in *On Their Way Rejoicing: The History and Role of the Bible in Africa*, by Ype Schaaf, translated by Paul Ellingworth (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994), 243–54; 'Types of African Theology', in *Christianity in Africa in the 1990s*, ed. Christopher Fyfe and Andrew F. Walls (Edinburgh: Centre of African Studies, 1996), 57; cf. Hans Visser and Gillian Bediako, introduction to *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience*, by Kwame Bediako (Oxford: Regnum, 2000), xiii.

<sup>17</sup> Kenneth Cragg, *Christianity in World Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 57; quoted in Bediako, 'Roots of African Theology', 58.

<sup>18</sup> Larbi, *Pentecostalism*, 29. To illustrate his point, Larbi references a Gold Coast Christian Council pamphlet that denies the reality of witchcraft.

they ended up producing ‘two-world’ Christians with double allegiance.’<sup>19</sup> Larbi agrees with first-generation Ghanaian scholar E. A. Asamoah that

no amount of denial on the part of the Church will expel belief in supernatural powers from the minds of the Christian, and he becomes a hypocrite who in official church circles pretends to give the impression that he does not believe in these things, while in his own private life he resorts to practices which are the results of such beliefs.<sup>20</sup>

### **3. ANALOGICAL CONTINUITY AS DEFINED BY AFRICAN SCHOLARS**

Focusing on the single-tiered interpretive structure of reality has the great advantage of locating continuity at a level that underlies both Africa’s traditional religions and Christianity. When we look for analogical continuity, we find that African scholars discuss two doorways into continuity. The first is the continuity established by the single-tiered interpretive landscape, which provides ‘landing places’ for Christianity’s particular doctrines on the primal African map. The second door for continuity is the assertion that God has never left himself without a witness, which allows theologians to affirm the Supreme or Creator God found in so many traditional religions as the same God who has revealed himself in Scripture as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As we work our way toward a better understanding of analogical continuity, we will now consider how various African scholars have used one or both of these doorways.

#### **3.1 A First Door: Analogical Continuity Rooted in the Single-Tiered Interpretive Landscape**

We will begin by looking at scholars who locate continuity primarily in the single-tiered interpretive landscape shared by both primal Akan religion and the Bible. Those who emphasize this point tend to be scholars who have given a great deal of attention to

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<sup>19</sup> Larbi, *Pentecostalism*, 29.

<sup>20</sup> E. A. Asamoah, ‘The Christian Church and African Heritage’, *International Review of Mission* 44, no. 175 (July 1955): 297; quoted in Larbi, *Pentecostalism*, 29.

Pentecostalism in Africa and the African Initiated Churches. That said, it is critical to understand that, as Cephas Omenyo points out, virtually all of the churches that are active in Ghana today are charismatic or Pentecostal. While use of the charismatic gifts—particularly healing—was once confined to ‘the margins’ of the AICs and, later, Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches, ‘the phenomenon has found its way into the mainline churches, thus blurring the sharp distinction between mainline churches and pentecostals’.<sup>21</sup> In other words, the study of Pentecostalism in Ghana today is really the study of Christianity in Ghana.

In this section, I will focus primarily on the work of Kwame Bediako, Ogbu Kalu, Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, Emmanuel Larbi, and Frank Kwesi Adams. Each of these scholars takes advantage of nuances within the single-tiered unitive perspective to emphasize particular concerns. Bediako, for example, helps us focus on the importance of the single-tiered framework as *praeparatio* for the gospel. Kalu demonstrates how Christianity’s cultural discourse with Africa’s religio-culture ecosystem prospers due to their common single-tiered understanding of reality. Asamoah-Gyadu focuses on Ghanaian believers’ practical application of the single-tiered landscape in the areas of prediction, explanation, and control; Larbi expands on this practical element. Finally, Adams both develops the idea of ‘bridges’ emerging from the single-tiered landscape and warns against the danger of using these bridges directly rather than analogically.

### **3.1.1 Analogical Continuity Emerging from Africa’s ‘Ontological Past’**

In Chapter Three, we examined Kwame Bediako’s use of the term ‘ontological past’.

Here, I want to emphasize the usefulness of this concept for drawing an analogical

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<sup>21</sup> Cephas Omenyo, ‘New Wine in an Old Wine Bottle? Charismatic Healing in the Mainline Churches in Ghana’, in *Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Healing*, ed. Candy Gunther Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 232.

connection between Akan practitioners of traditional religion and Akan Christians, as both groups view the world in terms of a single-tiered unitive perspective. Bediako agrees with John Mbiti that Africa's traditional religions are a *praeparatio evangelica* for the gospel,<sup>22</sup> and also that something significant from Africa's traditional religions would live on in the continent's new Christians.<sup>23</sup>

The idea of *praeparatio* assumes continuity, but does not specify its type, degree, or source. For Bediako, this continuity is rooted in Africa's ontological past, the enduring single-tiered unitive perspective on reality. According to Bediako, then, one of the tasks of African Christian theologians is 'to achieve some integration between the African pre-Christian religious experience and African Christian commitment in ways that would ensure the integrity of African Christian identity and selfhood'.<sup>24</sup> This occurs as African Christian scholars follow the logical trajectory of the single-tiered interpretive landscape as augmented by the further revelation found in Scripture. In a sense, they are laying down new tracks continuous with the old. Bediako cites Edward Fasholé-Luke who makes the same point when he writes that 'the quest for African Christian theologies amounts to attempting to make clear the fact that conversion to Christianity must be coupled with cultural continuity'.<sup>25</sup> Fasholé-Luke's 'cultural continuity' attains greater precision when we understand that the underlying continuity between Christianity and Africa's primal worldview resides in the single-tiered interpretive landscape.

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<sup>22</sup> So too does Frank Kwesi Adams, who wrote, 'Mbiti has made an enormous contribution to the study of African traditional religion and philosophy because he emphasised that the African pre-Christian heritage in religion was a way of God preparing Africa for the fuller revelation of God in Christ, a "*praeparatio evangelica*."' Frank Kwesi Adams, *Odwira and the Gospel* (Oxford: Regnum, 2010), 172.

<sup>23</sup> John Mbiti, 'The Future of Christianity in Africa', *Communio Viatorum: Theological Quarterly* 13, nos. 1–2 (1970): 36.

<sup>24</sup> Bediako, 'Types of African Theology', 56.

<sup>25</sup> Bediako, 'Types of African Theology', 58.

Bediako agrees with Andrew Walls that ‘the prime African theological quest at present is this: What is the relationship between Africa’s old religions and her new one?’<sup>26</sup> The answer, I suggest, is shaped by the fact that Africa’s traditional religions and Christianity offer analogical landing places to each other as a result of their shared interpretive landscape. Bediako recognizes the truth in Kwesi Dickson’s observation that ‘space had to be made for a positive pre-Christian religious memory in the African Christian consciousness, on the basis that ‘religion informs the African life in its totality’’.<sup>27</sup> For Bediako, memory—particularly memory of a reality in which the material and spiritual are inseparable—‘is integral to identity; and without memory, none of us knows who we are’.<sup>28</sup>

In his second major work, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*,<sup>29</sup> Bediako connects Africa’s primal view to the biblical world of the gospel. I have already discussed Bediako’s observation that Africa has not followed the West’s path into a secularized, two-tiered view of reality—Africans have embraced science and technology as tools to improve life, but they have done so within the framework of Africa’s ontological past and without losing an understanding of reality as an ‘essentially unified and “spiritual” nature’.<sup>30</sup> This fact alone illustrates that Africa’s ontological past is a powerful tool for understanding African Christian thinking. What the gospel will keep and what it will discard from Africa’s traditional religions is a question that will be asked within ‘a spirituality that was there already, even if [the

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<sup>26</sup> Andrew F. Walls, ‘Africa and Christian Identity’, *Mission Focus* 6, no. 7 (November 1978): 13; quoted in Bediako, ‘Types of African Theology’, 58.

<sup>27</sup> Bediako, ‘Understanding African Christian Theology’, 18; quoting Dickson, *Theology in Africa*, 29.

<sup>28</sup> Bediako, ‘Epilogue’, 250.

<sup>29</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*.

<sup>30</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 176.

gospel] has also pruned off some of its features and sharpened its focus, this time, upon Christ'.<sup>31</sup> In Bediako's view, the major difference between the African primal universe and the world portrayed in Scripture centres on the diffuse nature of spiritual power in the former (spread as it was among 'God, divinities and ancestors') and its concentration in the person of Christ in the latter, such that 'from the standpoint of the Gospel, God's saving activity towards us is focused on Christ, mediated through the Holy Spirit'.<sup>32</sup>

By affirming the fundamental spiritual-material unity of the universe, African Christian theology has committed itself to a path of continuity with the basic foundations of the single-tiered ontological past, though not with the specific details of Africa's traditional religions. According to Bediako,

the actual content of African theology may indicate that it is the affirmation of the primal spirituality which has provided its foundation. ... But it was the gospel itself which, by declaring that God has never left Himself without witness in the life of humankind, gave the impetus to African Christian scholars to embark on the study of the heritage of African peoples.<sup>33</sup>

Bediako returns often to Acts 14.17: 'Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness' (ESV). These words give Bediako the biblical foundation on which to argue his case. Further, Bediako agrees with Mbiti that the continuity between the traditional and Christian worldviews—particularly the fact that

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<sup>31</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 176.

<sup>32</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 217.

<sup>33</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 177. We note that Bediako himself, like many of his colleagues, uses both of the doors outlined above.



both African tradition and the gospel deal with life in its wholeness—makes it possible for a new African convert to ‘soon find himself on familiar ground’.<sup>34</sup>

Bediako points out that if Christianity was going to be African, it had to be continuous with Africa’s ontological past. He found this continuity in the single-tiered unitive perspective on reality (though he does not use this precise term), and this allowed him to affirm that Christianity can be—and is—authentically African.

### **3.1.2 Ogbu Kalu: ‘Lines of Congruence’ and ‘Different Colouring of the Maps’**

Ogbu Kalu, a Nigerian who knows the Akan landscape, makes extensive use of Andrew Walls’s phrase ‘African maps of the universe’. After noting that scholars like Bediako and Walls emphasize the continuity between primal religion and Christianity ‘with no sharp break in African understanding of relationships with the transcendent world’,<sup>35</sup> he quotes Walls: ‘the continuity in African religion, pre-Christian and Christian, is due in large measure to continuing worldviews, the application of the material of the Christian tradition to the already existing African maps of the universe’.<sup>36</sup> Kalu concludes that the world of the Bible and the African primal world make for highly compatible ‘bedfellows’ and that this approach shows great promise for ‘reevangelizing Africa’.<sup>37</sup> With Bediako in mind, he argues that African maps of the universe nicely allow room for biblical truth. There is, he suggests, an elasticity in the African worldview that is able to make room for new realities ‘which though seemingly from outside, come in to fulfil aspirations within the tradition. Kwame Bediako says that this is what early

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<sup>34</sup> Bediako is quoting John S. Mbiti, ‘Christianity and East African Culture and Religion’, *Dini na Mila: Revealed Religion and Traditional Custom* 3, no. 1 (May 1968): 4; quoted in Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 175.

<sup>35</sup> Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*, 74.

<sup>36</sup> Andrew F. Walls, ‘Introduction: African Christianity in the History of Tradition’, in Fyfe and Walls, 5; quoted in Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*, 74.

<sup>37</sup> Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*, 75.

Christians did with Jewish tradition in the letter to the Hebrews, providing a conceptual scheme for interpreting African Christianity'.<sup>38</sup>

Kalu argues that, at the local level, people take the new things they discover in biblical revelation and let them flow along 'lines of congruence' so that their religious experience is 'an organic, unified one' both before and after they become Christians.<sup>39</sup> In this, Kalu operates within the same non-static approach to religion championed by Terence Ranger and Darrel Whiteman, where the new adapts to the old along a logical trajectory established by the old. In this case, the 'old' that provides lines of congruence is the single-tiered material/spiritual understanding of reality. Consequently, Kalu shows little patience for western scholars who assumed that modernity would naturally bring with it the removal of the 'religio' from African culture. He argues instead for the need to re-locate cultural discourse into the single-tiered understanding of reality that underlies both Africa's traditional religions and Christianity, particularly as expressed in the AICs and Pentecostalism. Kalu himself takes seriously the cultural fit between the gospel and Africa's indigenous worldview, arguing that

Pentecostalism has grown because of its cultural fit into indigenous worldviews and its response to the questions that are raised within the interior of those worldviews. It asserts that the indigenous worldview still dominates contemporary African experience ... The face of Christianity acquired a different character in the encounter because it was now expressed in the idiom of the African world.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ogbu U. Kalu, ed., *African Christianity: An African Story* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007), 4.

<sup>39</sup> Kalu, *African Christianity*, 7. Kalu summarizes Bediako's *Theology and Identity* as urging 'a shift from a paradigm that conceives Christianity and African primal religion as the correlation of two entities thought to be independent' (6).

<sup>40</sup> Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*, 170. Kalu quotes the work of Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar to make the point that increased education has not convinced Africans that their understanding of reality is wrong or led them to adopt the two-tiered worldview of the West. See Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar, *Worlds of Power: Religious Thought and Political Practice in Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 51; quoted in Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*, 169–70.

Pentecostalism fits into the ‘African maps of the universe’ rather than changing in reaction to globalizing cultural forces—though Kalu readily admits the presence and power of these forces.<sup>41</sup>

We see how analogical continuity works as Pentecostals enter into power struggles and experience for themselves the Holy Spirit’s power over the ‘unclean spirits’ of traditional religion. The spirits are the landing place for the demonic spirits of the biblical world. Kalu calls this a ‘transformational cultural response’ in which Pentecostals

do not ignore but engage the primal contexts and renew the social system by critiquing and redefining possession. They brand all cults (central and peripheral) as satanic. But they do not end there. They provide an alternative—‘white,’ clean possession by the Holy Spirit (*Mzimu Woyera*) that is safer and less expensive. ... This explains why Pentecostals would speak about deliverance rather than exorcism. They do not just expel the demonic force but refill the person with a healthier, clean spirit so that the person can become truly human and achieve the vaunted life goals of a community.<sup>42</sup>

In other words, the ‘unclean spirits’ offer Pentecostals a line of congruence for understanding Satan’s work in their midst. There is continuity but it is analogical.

Where western missionaries sought to deal with the issues of deliverance, healing, exorcism, and protection from evil spells with western medicine and education—which Kalu calls an ‘effort to sidestep the African primal worldview with charitable institutions and [the] Western worldview’—African Christians, and Pentecostals in particular, used their own native soil and planted the gospel in its highly receptive ‘ecosystem’. For Kalu, this rootedness in ‘the texture of the African soil ... the interior of its idiom, nurture, and growth’ allows the fruits of African Christianity to ‘serve more adequately the challenges and problems of the African ecosystem than the earlier

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<sup>41</sup> It is worth noting, again, that ‘Pentecostalism’ is essentially coterminous with Christianity in Ghana.

<sup>42</sup> Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*, 172.

missionary fruits did'.<sup>43</sup> Again, we see the basis for continuity established in a shared interpretive landscape.

### 3.1.3 Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu: A Sharper Focus on Analogical Continuity

Asamoah-Gyadu agrees with Rudolph Otto's lament over 'the inability of "orthodox Christianity" to recognize the value of the non-rational aspect of religion, thus giving the "idea of the holy" what he calls a "one-sidedly intellectualist approach"'.<sup>44</sup>

Pentecostalism is a reaction to this 'cerebral' approach and a recovery of the experiential 'by demonstrating the power of the Spirit to infuse life, and the ability of the living presence of Jesus Christ to save from sin and evil'.<sup>45</sup> Drawing on Robin Horton's 'prediction, explanation, and control' rubric, Asamoah-Gyadu argues that Pentecostalism is succeeding in Africa because it accomplishes these three functions in African contexts where the fear of witchcraft and curse are still a part of everyday life. In other words, the African cosmology is still very much present, and Pentecostalism both recognizes and deals with this cosmology.

Asamoah-Gyadu also recognizes that continuity may be indirect. The deities and spirits of the African cosmology have been more sharply defined by the biblical categories of 'principalities and powers' and of Satan himself. The Bible offers up the colour palette with which Pentecostals re-paint the primal map to make it reflect biblical truth. Asamoah-Gyadu notes, for example, Christ's ministry as a 'healer and exorcist'.

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<sup>43</sup> Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*, 178.

<sup>44</sup> J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, 'Pentecostalism in Africa', in *African Theology on the Way: Current Conversations*, ed. Diane B. Stinton (London: SPCK, 2010), 62; quoting Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), 3. Asamoah-Gyadu is the author of two very important studies of Pentecostalism: *African Charismatics: Current Developments within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana* (Brill: Leiden, 2005), and *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity* (Oxford: Regnum, 2013).

<sup>45</sup> Asamoah-Gyadu, 'Pentecostalism in Africa', 62.

An analogical synthesis of the primal world view and the biblical picture of Christ's healing ministry and the battle Christians wage against the 'principalities' and 'powers' (Eph 6.12) opens the door for the healing and deliverance ministry of African Pentecostalism. Asamoah-Gyadu believes that what we see in the Pentecostal/charismatic renewal movement is the surfacing of a theology that resonates with the people, reflecting their deepest concerns and needs as they operate 'in continuity with the African religious paradigm' that is open 'to the supernatural'.<sup>46</sup> One might summarize their success as a result of their recognition of the continuity between the single-tiered unitive landscapes of the African cosmos and the biblical worldview, and their exploitation of the many points of analogical continuity between Christianity and Akan traditional religions that emerge out of that unitive landscape.

### **3.1.4 Emmanuel Kingsley Larbi: 'Harnessing the Power'**

Larbi, like Kalu and Asamoah-Gyadu, is a scholar of Pentecostalism. Larbi takes particular note of Pentecostal growth within the mainline churches after 1970,<sup>47</sup> though some Pentecostal activity was reported among Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Roman Catholics before this period. The growth of Pentecostalism was also nurtured by student-based para-church organizations, especially Scripture Union and University Christian Fellowship, and organizations such as the Full Gospel Business Men's

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<sup>46</sup> Asamoah-Gyadu, 'Pentecostalism in Africa', 67.

<sup>47</sup> See especially Chapter 4 in Larbi, *Pentecostalism*, f.n. 85 and 86. A fascinating case in point among post-1970 Presbyterians is Emmanuel Martey. After getting his PhD at Union Theological Seminary in New York City under James Cone he returned to Ghana and within two years was won over to a charismatic expression of his Presbyterian faith. Martey is a past Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana.

Fellowship and Women Aglow International that worked with professional men and women.<sup>48</sup>

Larbi pinpoints the success of this fully Trinitarian Christianity in the fact that Pentecostalism took seriously the Akan understanding of a single-tiered unitive landscape and the cosmology that emerged from it. Indeed, Larbi sees this as the explanation for why Pentecostalism has so far outstripped growth in mainline denominations despite the fact that the latter have been in Ghana for over two hundred years while Pentecostalism is a largely twentieth-century phenomenon. ‘From the human perspective’, writes Larbi, ‘the single significant factor that has given rise to a boom in Pentecostal activities in Ghana is that Pentecostalism has found fertile ground in the all-pervasive primal religious traditions, especially *in its cosmology* and *in its concept of salvation*’.<sup>49</sup>

While some have accused Pentecostals of ‘stealing sheep’, Larbi argues that Pentecostals were actually reaching nominal Christians who had remained nominal because the mission-founded churches failed to equip them to meet the challenges they faced from sorcery, demonic possession, and sickness.<sup>50</sup> ‘Every event here on earth’,

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<sup>48</sup> Larbi, *Pentecostalism*, 88–89; italics added. See also Samuel Adubofuor, *Evangelical Para-church Movements in Ghanaian Christianity: ca 1950 to Early 1990s* (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 1994). Another mark of the mainstream nature of Pentecostalism in Ghana is its embrace by leaders of the National Association of Evangelicals of Ghana, as shown by the fact that Tokunboh Adeyemo—General Secretary of the umbrella evangelical organization, the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar—was himself a Pentecostal. The Association’s critique would be that the movement needs a deeper grounding in the ‘sense knowledge’ of Scripture. In an effort to remedy this, Tokunboh Adeyemo served as General Editor of the *Africa Bible Commentary* in 2006. This single-volume commentary covered every book of the Bible and included the work of seventy African scholars writing on every book of the Bible. Kwame Bediako served as one of the project’s Theological Advisors. Tokunboh Adeyemo, ed., *Africa Bible Commentary* (Nairobi: WordAlive, 2006).

<sup>49</sup> Emmanuel Kingsley Larbi, ‘The Nature of Continuity and Discontinuity of Ghanaian Pentecostal Concept of Salvation in African Cosmology’, *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 5, no. 1 (2002): 99.

<sup>50</sup> ‘In Ghana, one of the major problems facing the church is that of nominalism. Whereas about 62% of the population of Ghana are Christians, only about 12% are active church members who attend church regularly. That is to say, about 50% or 8.3 million of the population are nominal Christians. Most of these belong to the established churches. According to the GEC 1993 National Church Survey, the period between 1988 and 1993 saw an increase in nominal Christians. Most of these belong to the older

writes Larbi, ‘is traceable to a supernatural power in the spirit realm’.<sup>51</sup> Pentecostals of all levels of education take this picture seriously; they believe it describes reality. Life, according to this primal cosmology, is the constant struggle to achieve what Larbi calls ‘cosmological balance’.<sup>52</sup> In traditional religions, charmers, enchanters, sorcerers, and witches manipulate hostile spirit forces, using amulets and charms to help or hurt. As Larbi writes, ‘The activities of charmers, enchanters, sorcerers, poisoners, and witches are directed against man in order to prevent him from enjoying abundant life, or to prevent him from fulfilling his *nkrabea* (destiny). The central focus of his religious exercises is thus directed towards the harnessing of power inherent in the spirit force for his own advantage.’ Pentecostals took this understanding of the world seriously while the mission-founded churches, to ‘the dismay’ of many of their adherents, did not.<sup>53</sup>

Pentecostals brought this Akan understanding of the world into their Christian faith because it fit the world they encountered in the Bible: a place of spiritual warfare where Spirit-filled believers ‘set the captives free, cast out demons from their human tenements, take dominion over the principalities, authorities and powers, heal the sick, and raise the dead’ and where ‘*signs and wonders should necessarily follow the preaching of the gospel, thus confirming the veracity of the Bible*’.<sup>54</sup> Pentecostalism treats the primal worldview of the Akan as a *praeparatio evangelica* (here he uses

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orthodox churches and Spiritual churches. This seems to be the segment of the population which is turning to the neo-Pentecostal churches. It is therefore most likely that the “nominal Christians” who join the neo-Pentecostals are Christians by association only rather than by conversion.’ Larbi, *Pentecostalism*, 325.

<sup>51</sup> Larbi, *Pentecostalism*, 100.

<sup>52</sup> Larbi, ‘Continuity and Discontinuity’, 103.

<sup>53</sup> Larbi, *Pentecostalism*, 425–26. See also Larbi, ‘Continuity and Discontinuity’, 103: ‘To the Akan, just like other African peoples, whatever happens to the human being has a religious interpretation. To them, behind the physical is the spiritual; behind the seen is the unseen. *From the spiritual source, therefore, lies the ultimate succor*’ (italics added).

<sup>54</sup> Larbi, ‘Continuity and Discontinuity’, 111; italics added.

Mbiti's term) because traditional religions tell people the truth about the ontological reality of the demonic even if they fail to lead people to Christ as the one who has and can overcome all such powers. Pentecostals insist that the spirits they used to fear were real but operating under assumed names. The Bible now gives them their proper names and recalibrates their actual power, a power overcome by the cross of Jesus and defeated by the greater power of the Holy Spirit in the believer. As Larbi notes, Pentecostal religion is intensely practical: 'the Pentecostal evangelistic message promised a better life for the sick, the destitute, drunkards, the downtrodden, the lonely, and other social groups'.<sup>55</sup> This promise fulfilled the hope of many Akan people for abundant life in the here and now; if it had not, Pentecostalism could not have taken hold within Akan religio-culture.

### **3.1.5 Frank Kwesi Adams: Analogical Continuity in the 'Bridges' and 'Cultural Channels' of Odwira**

Frank Kwesi Adams's contribution to our analysis of continuity is in identifying 'bridges' or 'cultural channels' in Odwira that prepare the way for understanding significant and complex Christian theological realities. In other words, Akan people do not need to be trained in Greco-Roman intellectual categories in order to understand the Eucharist, the Church, Christ's return, or Christology, because Akan religio-culture has sufficient categories of its own that can function analogically to explain these doctrines. Adams's study of Odwira serves as a case study in analogical continuity; at the same time, it also pinpoints the danger of looking for direct rather than analogical continuity.

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<sup>55</sup> Larbi, *Pentecostalism*, 437.



Adams gives us perhaps the most sustained consideration of analogical continuity in Chapter Nine of his book *Odwira and the Gospel*,<sup>56</sup> in which he uses Odwira to demonstrate how a thoroughly Akan institution provides bridges to the Christian faith. His point is that ‘the traditional religious values contained in the Odwira worldview can serve as cultural channels of developing Christianity for the Asante’.<sup>57</sup> Too many Ghanaian Christians have only a shallow grasp of the full gospel, Adams claims, because the missionaries failed to seek out and use these cultural channels. As a result, when troubles came, they returned to traditional practices for relief. The great failing of the colonial missionaries was that their ethnocentrism kept them from recognizing and exploiting the analogical continuity between Asante or Akan religio-culture and Christianity.

What we are calling analogical continuity, Adams calls a bridge for Christianity into Asante culture. Adams’s reasoning works on the basis of analogy by establishing continuity ‘with the essential elements of faith embedded in Asante Traditional Religion, that is, the Odwira’.<sup>58</sup> The Asante understand the meaning of Christian faith and doctrine more readily and personally when they are able to apply their existing

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<sup>56</sup> Adams, *Odwira and the Gospel*. The Odwira festival is a yearly event where Asante ‘history was re-enacted, reinterpreted and transmitted’ (21). The Odwira grew out of other traditional festivals among the Akan people, at which the Akan could ‘remember their past, reaffirm their allegiance to the state and also plan for the future of the state. Most of the festivals are religio-political festivals but there is also a social dimension’ (25). Adams concludes, ‘The religious rites, ritual, ideas and values embedded in the various Akan festivals demonstrate the cultural homogeneity of Asante culture and among the Akan community. ... The Akan festival is a time where the state is purified from past wrongs and is ushered into a new year. The key role of the chief and elders cannot be overestimated. The chief is seen as a symbol of unity and power. The important role of the ancestors as mediators is expressed in all the festivals. The priests pray to the ancestral spirits for protection and a good harvest for the coming year. The eating together by the community of the new yam is also a common feature for it expresses the unity and the fellowship that exist among the people. The dancing and the drumming of the people expresses the social dimension of the festival. Another important activity is the meeting of chiefs and elders to discuss the development of the community. The people use the occasion to pledge their allegiance to the chief and the state. The clearing of the path to the grove shows the reverence given to the ancestral spirits’ (29).

<sup>57</sup> Adams, *Odwira and the Gospel*, 164.

<sup>58</sup> Adams, *Odwira and the Gospel*, 176.

religio-cultural identity. So, Adams argues, ‘any way in which the gospel might be interpreted as the fulfilment of African cultural values and so be brought into fruitful contact with them will deepen Africa’s expression of their faith and will help construct Asante Christianity by giving a Christian meaning to Asante religious values’.<sup>59</sup>

Adams discusses four ways in which Odwira provides bridges for the gospel into the Asante heart and mind. All four, however, work by analogy as opposed to directly. First, a way for understanding the sacraments comes through the sprinkling of the Golden Stool with sacred water during the Odwira festival, which is already understood as ‘a form of baptism for the state’.<sup>60</sup> Second, the Asante understanding of community (from the unborn through to the ancestors) that is experienced through eating the yam offers a bridge into community with other believers and with God and ‘helps the Asante understand the Lord’s Supper as a sacrifice, memorial, ritual and fellowship meal’.<sup>61</sup> Third, their understanding of the ancestors gives Asante a bridge to understanding eschatology, while the concept of biblical time that is both *kairos* and *chronos* finds a home in Odwira time, which is both linear and spiral, encompassing a long past, a vibrant present, and a projected future.<sup>62</sup> This is augmented by belief in the afterlife, which existed before Christianity came to Ghana. Fourth, several aspects of Odwira suggest possible bridges for Christological thinking. Chiefs who mediate with ancestors and ancestors who mediate with the Supreme God can function in this way; so too can

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<sup>59</sup> Adams, *Odwira and the Gospel*, 179.

<sup>60</sup> Adams, *Odwira and the Gospel*, 181.

<sup>61</sup> Adams, *Odwira and the Gospel*, 199.

<sup>62</sup> Adams writes, ‘in Asante the past is projected into the future. This means that any religion that does not give the Asante a linkage to his past as a key to future orientation is likely to be misunderstood or ignored. The Asante concept of time and history is found in the communal meal with the ancestors.’ Adams, *Odwira and the Gospel*, 190. This picture of time contrasts sharply with John Mbiti’s reference to *mituki* and *tene* time, where the present ends in the past. John S. Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 29.

the leopard. Adams points out that the title *kurotwiamansa* (leopard) to describe Jesus draws on the connotations of the leopard's rule and fearless and speedy confrontation of enemies—traits associated with the leopard and, through Odwira, with the chiefs.<sup>63</sup>

Analogy provides a landing place for a partial Christology as Jesus becomes the great chief who, like a leopard, confronted the enemies, sin and death, on the cross.

Further, certain Odwira words show up in the Twi translation of the Bible, as for example in Heb 1.3, where *dwiraa* describes the purification of sins.<sup>64</sup> Adams writes

From the Odwira festival rites, the Asante Christian can recognise that Christ is the one and only appropriate sacrifice on behalf of the *ntoro* who gave himself as a sacrificial Lamb (totem) to be defiled. His blood has washed away sin and the defilement of sins is removed forever, so there is no need for a lamb to be defiled every year, for Christ has done it all. The Odwira purification rites and the use of the word *dwiraa* [to wash, to cleanse, or to purify] in the Twi Bible speak clearly of the atoning work of Christ.<sup>65</sup>

Adams concludes that 'these elements of faith are keys both to the understanding of Asante self-identity and also to the building of an indigenous Asante Christianity'.<sup>66</sup> He asserts that the Odwira festival and the worldview it represents are the key to understanding Asante religio-culture and identity. The 'religious values, ideas, symbols, and rituals' of Odwira can thus become guidelines or channels for 'enriching Asante Christianity'.<sup>67</sup> When Christianity 'incarnates' itself within Asante culture, it is entering a culture whose identity has been shaped in large part by Odwira.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Adams, *Odwira and the Gospel*, 177.

<sup>64</sup> Kwame Bediako discusses Odwira in *Christianity in Africa*, 70ff. For a discussion of Bediako's use of this same verse, see Chapter Three above.

<sup>65</sup> Adams, *Odwira and the Gospel*, 195.

<sup>66</sup> Adams, *Odwira and the Gospel*, 199.

<sup>67</sup> Adams, *Odwira and the Gospel*, 200.

<sup>68</sup> Adams, *Odwira and the Gospel*, 205–06.

Even as he embraces these points of analogical continuity, Adams warns about the discontinuities between Christianity and Asante traditional religion. For example, the eating of yams with ancestors—an act accompanied by sacrifice, memorial, a thanksgiving, and a fellowship meal—points to a theology of the Eucharist. However, as the Eucharist must point to Jesus alone, ‘the Asante Christian is forbidden to eat yam offered to the ancestral spirits. The Lord’s Supper and the ancestral meal are mutually exclusive because at both the worshippers participate in a relationship with a deity.’<sup>69</sup> Nonetheless, the Odwira meal can serve as a channel into the Lord’s Supper, a ‘means by which Christians respond to the grace which God bestows through Christ’.<sup>70</sup>

In effect, Adams is pointing out the inherent danger in any attempt to find direct continuity between Odwira and the gospel—a danger I have emphasized, and one from which the analogical approach shields us. Because Adams understands Akan traditional religion as a ‘preparation for the Gospel’<sup>71</sup> he sees the bridges, cultural channels, and landing places in Odwira as pointing to their essential fulfilment in the gospel. He encourages the use of these bridges to cross over completely into biblical orthodoxy.

### **3.2 A Second Door: Analogical Continuity Rooted in ‘God Has Spoken at All Times and Places’**

As we begin this discussion, we should note that there are substantial grounds for believing that scholars who argue for continuity on the basis of ‘God has spoken’ are operating from a single-tiered unitive perspective on reality. Consequently, what we are

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<sup>69</sup> Adams, *Odwira and the Gospel*, 184. This reminds us of Kalu’s strong objection to any attempt to establish continuity between African traditional religions’ covenants and the biblical covenants. See Kalu, *African Christianity*, 8.

<sup>70</sup> Adams, *Odwira and the Gospel*, 184.

<sup>71</sup> Adams writes that John Mbiti ‘made an enormous contribution to the study of African traditional religion and philosophy because he emphasised that the African pre-Christian heritage in religion was a way of God preparing Africa for the fuller revelation of God in Christ, a “*praeparatio evangelica*.”’ Adams, *Odwira and the Gospel*, 172.

looking at now is more a matter of emphasis than an entirely new way of understanding continuity. In this section, we will explore various nuances and emphases in the work of Kwesi Dickson, Peter Sarpong, Pashington Obeng, and Emmanuel Martey. Dickson uses his training as an Old Testament scholar to draw a picture of the world of the ancient Israelites and their non-Jewish neighbours, the *goyim*, in which Akan can feel very much at home. Emmanuel Martey includes creation itself in his understanding of the Word of God, thus establishing the validity of revelation to the Akan preceding the arrival of the missionaries. Peter Sarpong questions the work of ethnographers who argued that traditional religions only began to ascribe biblical traits to their Supreme God after coming into contact with Christian missionaries. For Sarpong in particular, the incarnation of Jesus was a key to leading Akan people to Christian faith. Pashington Obeng looks in some detail at how God gave true revelation of himself to the Akan through their traditional religion, even if that revelation stopped short of being fully salvific. In this section, I will develop these and other ideas in order to demonstrate the underlying continuity between Africa's traditional religions and biblical religio-culture. I will also highlight how their embrace of natural theology places these theologians in opposition to one of the leading twentieth-century western theologians, Karl Barth.

### **3.2.1 Kwesi Dickson**

Kwesi Dickson roots his understanding of continuity in a recognition that the God who has revealed himself to us in Scripture is the God of the whole earth, interested not only in his chosen people but also in the gentiles (*goyim*). As Dickson puts it, God, 'according to this Old Testament tradition, is God of the whole earth and is concerned

with Israel and the *goyim*. Among the latter God is also at work'.<sup>72</sup> This is Dickson's starting point. From here, he turns to Scripture. Dickson notes that Africans have a particular affinity for the Old Testament; as an Old Testament scholar himself, he knows the territory well. In reading the Old Testament, the Akan recognize immediately that religion pervaded all of life not only for the Israelites but also for the *goyim*. In other words, the Old Testament pictures a world of religio-culture. The creation of this world by the one Supreme God establishes a basis for the deep ontological continuity between Israel's and the ancient world's religio-cultures and Akan religio-culture.

Dickson uses the term 'monolithic simplicity' to describe societies that 'see life in its totality as informed by religion'.<sup>73</sup> Africa shares this 'monolithic simplicity' with the Old Testament. Dickson cites a number of places where this phenomenon is observed in the Old Testament: Sisera's chariots getting caught in the mud after a God-sent rain; sin and sickness going together (David murdering Uriah and the death of his son); moving landmarks (Prv 23.10-11); skilled craftsmen receiving their 'gift' from God (Ex 28.3); and God's role in farming (Is 28.24f). All of this helps the Akan feel themselves to be operating in a kindred atmosphere as they read the Old Testament. Dickson then points to three areas of significant continuity between the Old Testament and African life: a common 'theology of nature', spirit possession, and a shared view of the individual in community. These areas of continuity only make sense in the context of a common worldview underlying both religio-cultures, but Dickson's starting point is the God who has revealed himself to all peoples.<sup>74</sup> This approach distances Dickson and his

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<sup>72</sup> Kwesi A. Dickson, 'Continuity and Discontinuity between the Old Testament and African Life and Thought', in *African Theology en Route*, ed. Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979), 101–02.

<sup>73</sup> Dickson, *Theology in Africa*, 155.

<sup>74</sup> For more on areas of Dickson's understanding of continuity see Chris Ukachukwu Manus, 'Methodological Approaches in Contemporary African Biblical Scholarship: The Case of West Africa',

colleagues operating out of the single-tiered unitive perspective from European theologians who reject natural theology, especially Karl Barth. Dickson's work demonstrates how it is possible to embrace natural theology without ending in a religious pluralism that denies the uniqueness of Jesus.<sup>75</sup>

### 3.2.2 Emmanuel Martey

Emmanuel Martey agrees with Dickson that the Word of God spoke to his African ancestors through creation. As a result, the ancestors developed a religio-culture that embraced their experience of both the natural and the supernatural and 'satisfied their expectation of the transcendent in the immanent'.<sup>76</sup> Drawing on the work of Luke Mbefo, Martey argues that Africans' knowledge of God preceded Christianity's arrival—at the very least through the Word of God spoken in creation. This was real knowledge, which means that Africa's religio-culture and epistemology are valid authorities, even if they were waiting to be fulfilled in the gospel.<sup>77</sup>

When Martey asserts that the Word of God spoke to his Akan ancestors, he is referring not to Jesus or Scripture, but to the apprehension of God that came through creation. Here Martey draws a direct connection between the Word of God and what is

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in *African Theology Today*, ed. Emmanuel Katongole (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 2002), 1–21.

<sup>75</sup> In *Theology in Africa*, Dickson rejects Barth's emphasis on the absolute disconnect between God and mankind as foreign to the African way of thinking, preferring the work of John Hick and Hans Kung, who see continuity (and validity) in other religions and the true God revealed in Scripture and Jesus. Dickson, *Theology in Africa*, 29ff. Dickson is not, however, a religious pluralist. Akper and Koopman point out that, for Dickson and his colleagues, Jesus becomes the standard that decides what is or can be continuous and what cannot. They note that the 1966 Ibadan conference—where Dickson was a major voice—summarized its work in this way: 'We recognise the radical quality of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ; and yet it is because of this revelation that we can discern what is truly of God in our pre-Christian heritage: this knowledge of God is not totally discontinuous with our people's previous traditional knowledge of Him.' Quoted in G. I. Akper and N. N. Koopman, 'Where Do We Go from Here?' *Dutch Reformed Theological Journal* 46, nos. 1–2 (March–June 2005): 7–21; also found in Kwesi A. Dickson, *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs* (London: Longman & Todd, 1969), 16.

<sup>76</sup> Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 72–73.

<sup>77</sup> For more on African epistemology, see Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995).

often referred to as general revelation. Analogical continuity exists because God speaks in harmony with himself. Traditional religions therefore express certain truths found also in the Word incarnate and in Scripture—including, for example, the reality that the transcendent can be experienced in the immanent. The continuity in revelation is rooted in the one God who speaks in all three places, leading to the possibility of a theology that is both African and Christian.

God had spoken to our ancestors before the arrival of Christianity; our ancestors had responded to God's address before the arrival of Christianity. In other words, for Christianity to have meaning and relevance, it cannot come as totally alien and unconnected with the Word of God spoken to our ancestors through creation. ... The task is to discover how this word was heard and its repercussions in the life of our ancestors. [African] theologians believe that Christianity should continue, through fulfilment, this original Word of God.<sup>78</sup>

Martey also sees Africa's 'religiocultural approach' and 'the traditional African epistemology' combining to form Africa's 'point of departure' for thinking about Christology. This perspective demonstrates his recognition of the close connection between asserting that God has spoken to the ancestors and the single-tiered unitive perspective on reality.<sup>79</sup> The two doors give access to the same reality.

### **3.2.3 Bishop Peter Sarpong**

Peter Sarpong, a Roman Catholic bishop and trained social anthropologist, understands and explicitly identifies the two doorways into continuity between the Akan primal world view and Christian faith. First, Sarpong understands that the Akan operate from a single-tiered, non-separable view of reality: 'In all Africa, we deal in dualities. Everything has two sides—the visible side and the invisible side; the spiritual side and

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<sup>78</sup> Luke Mbefo, 'Theology and Inculturation: Problems and Prospects – The Nigerian Experience', *Nigerian Journal of Theology* 1 no. 1 (December 1985): 55; quoted in Martey, *African Theology*, 72–73.

<sup>79</sup> Martey, *African Theology*, 80.



the material side; the observable side and the unobservable side.’<sup>80</sup> Sarpong considers this insight to be especially important in a world increasingly ‘terrorized by a crude technocracy’: ‘the world needs to know from Africa that the dichotomy between the sacred and profane, the spiritual and the bodily, is artificial’. When people lose this understanding, they lose ‘the religious dimension of justice, peace and development’, for which there is no replacement. Furthermore, to lose the ‘values of the spirit’ is to lose everything which ‘enables the African to live in a joyful, happy atmosphere, in spite of Africa’s destitution’.<sup>81</sup>

In Africa’s traditional cultures, Sarpong writes, ‘religion is a way of life, not a fashion’. Religion is not learned, but ‘accepted and absorbed in the normal course of events. As an integral part of culture, it shares culture’s compulsory, impersonal, objective and universal nature.’<sup>82</sup> In other words, Sarpong would not object to understanding African traditional culture using Dickson’s term ‘religio-culture’. At the same time, Sarpong argues that the God who has revealed himself in Scripture is the same God who revealed himself in Africa’s traditional religions. Indeed, he notes that the attributes of the African God were so similar to the attributes of the biblical God that nineteenth-century ethnographers suspected that borrowing had already taken place. Sarpong, however, rejects this notion. Instead, he argues not only that African traditional religions had a Supreme God but that this God is the biblical God of

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<sup>80</sup> Sarpong, *Peoples Differ*, 90.

<sup>81</sup> Peter Sarpong, forward to *An Afro-Christian Vision*, by G. O. Ehus’ani (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991), ix–x. He continues, ‘When all is said and done, respect for the sacredness of life is the supreme value with which Africa could nourish humanity. This indeed is a summary of “Ozovehe”: The Human Person is Life. In the Western world, the “good life” has come to be equated with mechanical ingenuity, and easy and cheap productivity. Such an equation is ultimately dehumanizing. If technology is in itself a good thing and a means of sharing in the creativity of God, then personal values must be preserved to make the efforts of technology meaningful. Africans might assist the world in a process of revaluation.’

<sup>82</sup> Peter Sarpong, ‘Christianity Meets Traditional African Cultures’, in *Faith Meets Faith*, ed. G. H. Anderson and T. F. Stransky (New York: Paulist, 1981), 242.

Christianity. The missionaries brought not a new God, but news of the incarnation, which revealed a new dimension to the God Africans already knew. Consequently, ‘The preacher in Africa ... is preaching an old God who has been revealed to us positively by his Son. If he studies and makes use of the belief of the Africans, then he is giving a new dimension to, rather than correcting, their religious conception.’<sup>83</sup>

What, then, does Sarpong say about continuity? To begin, Sarpong assumes that people are the same though cultures are different.<sup>84</sup> The understanding that the Akan traditional God is the God revealed in the Bible is the bridge over which continuity travels, while the incarnation is the sign guiding the Akan to that bridge and to the path they should follow once they cross it. In this sense, Sarpong sees continuity between the African traditional God and the biblical God as direct, if incomplete. The story had been partially told in Africa’s religious traditions, but was waiting to be completed by Jesus’ incarnation.

For Sarpong, the incarnation of Jesus is key, for it lays the foundation for the gospel to make its home in every culture—a process Sarpong refers to as inculturation. Without the incarnation, there is no inculturation. Jesus lived, ate, and spoke within the context of a particular culture, but his message was for every people and culture. At the same time ‘every culture had to make it its own. ... When the Lord asked His disciples to go and preach to all nations, He meant just that. They were to preach to all peoples in the concrete situation of life they found themselves in. ... So, inculturation takes its inspiration from the Incarnation.’<sup>85</sup> Sarpong identifies a similar impulse in the 1659

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<sup>83</sup> Sarpong, ‘Christianity Meets Traditional African Cultures’, 242.

<sup>84</sup> See his concluding chapter in *Peoples Differ*.

<sup>85</sup> Sarpong, *Peoples Differ*, 22–23.

Instruction given to missionaries on their way to China by the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith,<sup>86</sup> which stated:

Do not waste your zeal or your powers of persuasion in getting these people to change their rites unless these be very obviously opposed to faith and morals. For what could be more ridiculous than to import France, Spain, Italy or any other part of Europe into China? What you carry with you is not a national culture but a message which does not object to or offend the sound tradition of any country but rather fosters it.<sup>87</sup>

Sarpong understands, of course, that the words Akan traditional religion uses to describe God differ from those used in the western tradition. In one fascinating passage, he argues that trying to define the Akan understanding of God as either monotheist or polytheist doesn't make sense. The single-tiered interpretive landscape, which embraces the Akan cosmology as real, acknowledges a Supreme Creator God—a clearly monotheistic position. On the other hand, the Akan cosmos has room for deities, spirits, and ancestors 'to whom public cult is directed'. This being the case, Sarpong admits that 'one can conclude with some measure of justification that [Akan religion] is polytheistic'. He is quick to note, however, that within the Akan understanding of reality 'these conceptions of theism or pneumatic religion are not incompatible'.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> The Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, perhaps better known by the Latin name *Propaganda fide*, was the administrative branch of the Roman Catholic Church with responsibility for missionary work. It continues to exist today, though since 1982 it has been known as the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples.

<sup>87</sup> Sarpong, *Peoples Differ*, 25. The attitude expressed in documents like this (whether or not it was actually put into practice on the mission field) is noticeably different from the dominant (though not universal) attitude of the colonial missionaries of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Indeed, Sarpong notes that the legacies of the pioneering Jesuit missionaries Matteo Ricci in China and Roberto Di Nobili in India were thwarted by a combination of nationalism and jealousy: 'Both Dominicans and Jesuits from one country would take one stand against Dominicans and Jesuits from another country. Jealousy, which is a very dangerous thing, was another cause of the controversy. Hence the root causes of the confusion were misunderstanding, jealousy, prejudice and excessive particularism, the very vices that Inculturation seeks to eradicate.' Sarpong, *Peoples Differ*, 27. For the 1659 document quoted by Sarpong, see *Collectanea Sacrae Congregationis de propaganda fide seu decreta instructiones rescripta pro apostolicis missionibus: Ann. 1622–1866*, vol. 1 (Rome: Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide, 1907), 42–43.

<sup>88</sup> Peter Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect* (Accra: Ghana Publishing, 1974), 12. This idea of the both/and would speak directly to p'Bitek's criticism and suggest that p'Bitek is himself falling prey to a western dichotomous descriptive narrative rather than the African (in this case, Akan) story.

Sarpong's argument is that, within its own frame of reference, there is no contradiction in the Akan mind.

Sarpong insists that the Akan have their own way of understanding the world that is logical, nuanced, and 'advanced', and argues that 'an advanced stage in technological and scientific culture' is not necessary for a culture to possess an advanced conception of God—in fact, 'in most cases the contrary is true'.<sup>89</sup> Further, there is no need to assume that Ghanaians got their conception of a Supreme God *de novo* from the missionaries—Sarpong argues that the Ghanaian understanding pre-dates the arrival of the missionaries, as evidenced by their many cultural expressions of this understanding.

If the Ghanaian concept of God had been borrowed from missionaries, it would hardly have been possible for it to have been so well impressed on the minds of the people, and incorporated into their language, art, poetry, proverbs, day-to-day behaviour and drumming as we have had occasion to explain.<sup>90</sup>

For this reason, when Sarpong delineates the attributes of God he is careful to avoid the mistake (and hence the accusations of critics such as Okot p'Bitek) of using Hellenistic categories. The resulting language is less technical, but more authentically Akan.

Sarpong's assertion is that Africa and the West use different vocabularies to refer to the same God. Further, he argues that the language Africa uses to speak of God has something to contribute to the global conversation that would be lost if they stopped using it. It is good, then, that 'in Ghanaian thought, God is Magnanimous, Holy, a Hater of evil and a Creator'.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect*, 13.

<sup>90</sup> Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect*, 13. Sarpong is arguing against the extreme localization of the concept of God suggested by anthropologists who claimed that the Akan conception of a 'supreme' God was the result of trying to keep up with the missionaries' description of the Christian God as omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent.

<sup>91</sup> Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect*, 10–11.

While Akan traditional practice does not include direct worship of the Supreme God—there is no priesthood dedicated to him and no temples built for him, Sarpong notes that prayers offered to the *abosom* usually begin by invoking the Supreme God's name. Given the understanding that any power over the elements or over one's happiness is ultimately derived from the Supreme Creator God and Originator of all life, this is simply the logical thing to do. Consequently, as Sarpong notes in a wonderfully common sense way,

it is only in accordance with true wisdom and sanity that the Giver of sunshine and light, the Provider of rain, the Origin of air, the Donor of repletion or satisfaction, the Creator of rain, the unfailing copiousness of water—all items on which depends the very survival of the human race and, which form the main object of the Ghanaian's prayer—should be prominently mentioned.<sup>92</sup>

While Akan traditionalists prayed indirectly, Akan Christians may now pray directly to the God who has revealed himself in Jesus. The new dimension of the Supreme God revealed in Jesus means that the prayers once offered to the *abosom* or the ancestors may now be directed to the Supreme God, who is now understood to be even greater than once thought. The continuity here is analogical rather than direct.

In a short chapter of *Faith Meets Faith*, titled 'Christianity Meets Traditional African Cultures', Sarpong lists areas of continuity between Christianity and Akan culture.<sup>93</sup> As we have noted, some were direct (as in certain common attributes of God), while others are better described as analogical. Examples of the latter include a wise combination of 'matrilineal' and 'patrilineal' perspectives on the fatherhood of God; the family as community; continuity in the sacraments understood through the lens of the

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<sup>92</sup> Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect*, 11.

<sup>93</sup> Sarpong, 'Christianity Meets Traditional African Cultures', 241–42. Sarpong is putting culture in conversation with Christianity rather than Akan traditional religion; however, as he has made abundantly clear Akan culture is, in Kwesi Dickson's words, religio-culture, firmly rooted in the reaction of the Akan to their experience of a world they see and understand to be rooted in a single-tiered ontological structure of reality which is then given form and substance in their religio-culture.

single-tiered unitive perspective on reality; seeing in the living dead a new and robust way of understanding the communion of the saints; and certain rites of passage. On the last point, Sarpong discusses three major rites: birth, achieving adulthood, and death. Each rite is expected to accomplish what it portrays. We see here a strong suggestion of ‘analogical continuity’ with the Christian sacraments.<sup>94</sup> Indeed, Sarpong uses language highly suggestive of the sacraments when he writes,

The ceremonies are not only meant to signify something real and of importance. They are also intended to effect what they stand for; so that when a girl initiand is given an egg to swallow whole so that her future labours may turn out to be easy, the girl and the community are telling the spirits what they want from them (the expressive or suggestive aspect of the rite). But they also believe that the egg will ensure that her labours are easy in view of the fact that eggs are laid and hatched with ease by the hen (the effective aspect of the rite).<sup>95</sup>

Sarpong also notes places where Akan traditional practice does not offer landing places for the gospel.<sup>96</sup> Sarpong lists seven in particular: traditional religion’s treatment of women, certain initiatory rites, loving enemies, equality of all human beings, certain key doctrines (the Trinity, Incarnation, Eucharist, Resurrection), the value of suffering and humility, and marriage. It is interesting to note that Sarpong’s list includes references to both women and equality. In Chapter Six, we will look at Mercy Amba Oduyoye’s use of analogical continuity to find a basis within Akan religio-culture for the full equality of men and women.

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<sup>94</sup> Elsewhere, Sarpong emphasizes the role of analogical continuity with regard to understanding the Eucharist. It is both foolish and unnecessary, he argues, to invoke Aquinas’s theology to explain the real presence of Christ in the elements at the Lord’s Supper to people whose single-tiered unitive landscape already provides a place for the material and the spiritual to interpenetrate as they exist side by side. See Chapter Two (‘Inculturation’) in Sarpong, *Peoples Differ*.

<sup>95</sup> Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect*, 73.

<sup>96</sup> Sarpong, ‘Christianity Meets Traditional African Cultures’, 241.

### 3.2.4 Pashington Obeng

Just as Adams's analysis of Odwira provided a case study of how one scholar located analogical continuity primarily through the door of the single-tiered understanding of reality, Pashington Obeng's work provides a case study for the location of continuity initially in God's having spoken to all people in all times and places.

Obeng is a Ghanaian Presbyterian who has studied Roman Catholic theology among the Akan in depth and wants to understand where non-Christian faiths fall in the post-Vatican II landscape in light of the church's 'fundamental belief that Christ is the only source of salvation'.<sup>97</sup> Obeng finds his answer in the words of the document 'Meeting the African Religions', which makes conceptual space for Africa's traditional religions to be understood as real sources of revelation, while stopping short of assigning salvific value to that revelation.<sup>98</sup> This is possible, in Obeng's opinion, because it is the same God who reveals himself, whether uniquely in Jesus Christ or more generally in African traditional religions.

Obeng quotes Cardinal Maurice Otunga of Kenya, who during the Synod of 1977 in Rome stressed that Africa's traditional religions possessed 'salvific seeds' or 'seeds of the Word', such that 'African culture possesses seeds that can produce flowers that have never been seen before'.<sup>99</sup> Like Dickson and Martey, Obeng emphasizes that God revealed himself to every people prior to the revelation found in Scripture and in Jesus. By drawing attention to Cardinal Otunga's image of 'salvific seeds' that might germinate into new varieties of flower in African culture, Obeng is suggesting a

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<sup>97</sup> Pashington Obeng, *Asante Catholicism: Religious and Cultural Reproduction among the Akan of Ghana* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 125.

<sup>98</sup> This document, 'Meeting the African Religions' was produced by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue of the Vatican three years after the close of Vatican II.

<sup>99</sup> Obeng, *Asante Catholicism*, 128.

continuity that grants traditional African religions a validity of their own—not a validity apart from God’s revelation in Jesus, but one that is unique nonetheless. The image of previously unseen flowers is striking. Obeng begins with God’s self-revelation in traditional religions and then most fully in Christ, and goes on to identify places in Akan religio-culture that provide good soil for these new flowers.

We see something of what these new flowers look like in Obeng’s analysis of a mass that incorporated practices introduced by Bishop Peter Sarpong. In the Asante Roman Catholic mass, God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is described using terms that the true God used to reveal himself in traditional religions.<sup>100</sup> To the degree that these titles, derived from Asante culture, enlarge our picture of Jesus, Obeng suggests we are seeing new ‘flowers’. Obeng also discusses the role in Catholic worship of healing and the use of the healing water—which, again, the true God revealed to practitioners of traditional religions as a source of healing. As the Catholic priest sprinkled holy water, Obeng noted that people strained to have it fall on them. For westerners, it would be difficult not to regard this as a magical rite. Within a single-tiered religio-culture, however, it is not magical at all, but rather the normal and logical reaction of someone who understands that the material and spiritual are inseparable.

When the priest says

Come receive showers of life and vitality  
 See the showers of life and vitality,  
 come and bathe in them (repeat)  
 The showers of life and vitality are being sprinkled  
 These showers cure diseases, they give peace  
 They cleanse sins, come bathe in them

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<sup>100</sup> Thus Jesus is described as ‘an *akasa bebu* (living parable) ... The war lord medicine man who smells like gunpowder ... The antqueen in an ant hill, the healer ... O Great Captain and valiant one! ... King of the deep forest ... O Great war lord ... the great leopard ... one who wears Prempeh’s steel garment ... The creator of heaven and earth has arrived.’ Similarly, God the Father is referred to as, ‘O Great God O God, mother par excellence ... Triune Supreme Being ... Grandsire God ... Almighty God, O sacred drummer’, and the Holy Spirit as ‘Messenger spirit’. Obeng, *Asante Catholicism*, 133–47.



Life and vitality are being showered, come bathe in them, Akan churchgoers do not hear metaphors, they hear promises of what God will do—a fulfilment of God’s promise already partially experienced in their traditional religions.<sup>101</sup> God is the victor, and that victory is both spiritual and material, natural and supernatural. Here, again, we see the Asante map being painted with the gospel palette using the brush of analogical continuity.

After examining in some detail the healing service at St. Peter’s Cathedral in Kumasi, Obeng notes several of the ways in which the liturgy draws upon the Asante worldview now interwoven with the Judeo-Christian one. For example, references to God as the ‘great warrior’ combine biblical images with the Asante tradition of warrior heroes. Similarly, invoking the power of the Holy Spirit to descend in power to heal resonates with the Asante understanding of the power and presence of spirits.<sup>102</sup> Obeng also describes an early-morning mass in a village parish, at which he observed the use of holy water, song, and dance—elements known and used in traditional Asante religio-culture—during the anointing of the sick. The priest told Obeng that the holy water provided protection to people who were convinced that their troubles were due to the

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<sup>101</sup> Like other African scholars, Obeng is careful to note that the Akan deal in a world where both spiritual and material causes are used to explain illness. He writes, ‘the Akan do recognize both natural and spiritual causes of illness. Some illnesses are caused by sorcerers, others are the punishment from ancestors, while others may be caused by black magic. The Akan, including the Asante, are aware of diseases like malaria, which may be caused by mosquito bites, or swelling of parts of the body resulting from worms. With that perspective the people remedy natural diseases with natural means, and illnesses of the spirit are combated with spiritual force. ... Beliefs and practices of both Western medicine and indigenous therapy depend on different assumptions. The sick and their therapy managers, however, move between both systems since what matters to them is the cure. It is thus legitimate for a practitioner of an indigenous healing system to contend that when an illness is not cured by herbs and other medications, it may have been caused by conflict, tension, hostility, guilt or some dysfunction in both the individual and in the social dimension, and then proceed to provide healing.’ Obeng, *Asante Catholicism*, 149.

<sup>102</sup> Obeng, *Asante Catholicism*, 157.

activities of *abayifo* (that is, witches; cf. *bayie*, witchcraft).<sup>103</sup> This priest, who said he functioned as ‘prophet, healer, and pastor to his people’, was disturbed by western-trained priests who psychologised ‘bewitchment’, saying ‘You’ve no right to tell a sick person that his/her illness is only imaginary’.<sup>104</sup>

Obeng also mentions the Buoho shrine, fashioned after Lourdes, and located on ‘a sacred Asante mountain’.<sup>105</sup> There could hardly be a better example of a landing place for Christian faith in Asante religio-culture than the construction of a shrine for healing on an already sacred Asante mountain.<sup>106</sup> The site, Obeng writes, ‘provides an example of how indigenous religious life and practice around sacred groves and mountains have found literal and symbolic correspondence with the Bible at Buoho. ... A sacred Asante mountain spot has become a place for Christian spiritual renewal.’<sup>107</sup>

Obeng enters the continuity discussion through the doorway of the one Supreme God’s communication to all peoples. He is, however, also quite aware of the other door. Asante Catholics have not set aside the beliefs about reality they grew up with; they still believe them to be true. Obeng writes, for example, of a Tikopia chief who made

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<sup>103</sup> Obeng notes that during the wedding service the priest prays for protection for the new couple from the ‘evil one’. The Asante word used is *bayie*, which ‘can refer to a bad witch, sorcerer, or any human being serving as an agent of some spirit. By implication, *bayie* was capable of disrupting the relationship that was being contracted and therefore the couples should be alert to prevent it from happening.’ Obeng, *Asante Catholicism*, 172.

<sup>104</sup> Obeng, *Asante Catholicism*, 147–148.

<sup>105</sup> An internet search revealed a short video of a supposed apparition of the Virgin Mary at Buoho: TheBobi28, ‘Apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary’, YouTube video, August 18, 2014, accessed March 25, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HpIC0Z7x1Ks>.

<sup>106</sup> This would appear to be doing exactly what the seventh-century Pope Gregory advised Mellitus to do on his mission to England: ‘the temples of the idols in that nation should by no means be destroyed, but let the idols that are in them be destroyed. Let holy water be prepared, and sprinkled in the said temples, let altars be erected and relics placed. For if those temples are well-built, they must be converted from the worship of devils to the service of the true God; that the nation, seeing that their temples are not destroyed, may remove error from their hearts, and, knowing and adoring the true God, may the more familiarly resort to the places to which they have been accustomed.’ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, bk. 1, ch. 30; quoted in Christian G. Baeta ‘The Challenge of African Culture to the Church, and the Message of the Church to African Culture’, in *Christianity and African Culture* (Accra: Christian Council of the Gold Coast, 1955), 54–55.

<sup>107</sup> Obeng, *Asante Catholicism*, 161.

farewell offerings to the old gods when he converted to Christianity. Obeng argues that these people undergo ‘ideological adjustment as their songs, dance, and prayers evoke sentiments of their past collective bravery, prowess and power of kings, and attitude toward malevolent powers. Those ideas and idioms are redistributed in Christian worship which means that their *Asante indigenous ways are still a living force*’,<sup>108</sup>

### **3.3 Analogical Continuity: A Way Forward in the Continuity-Discontinuity Debate**

We now turn to the question of whether analogical continuity provides scholars with a tool that can help them get beyond the apparent impasse between those who see continuity between Africa’s traditional religions and Christianity and those who argue against even the possibility of such continuity. In approaching this question, it is helpful first to note the number of African scholars and western anthropologists who are currently arguing against the adoption of a methodology rooted in the two-tiered ontological assumptions of the West over against Africa’s single-tiered understanding. Two points are worth noting. First, there is a growing recognition that western-trained social scientists use tools shaped by the West’s two-tiered perception of reality, which overwhelmingly privileges the material over the spiritual. Second, scholars are recognizing that such tools skew data due to their inability to examine the African context according to its own single-tiered understanding of reality. In the short analysis that follows, I will establish a frame of reference that will support my critique of Okot p’Bitek, since his arguments reflect his western training in anthropology. My critique of Byang Kato is rooted in the theological framework already established above.

Kwasi Wiredu points out that western scholars brought their categories and applied them to African thinking, classifying as material many things Africans saw as

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<sup>108</sup> Obeng, *Asante Catholicism*, 217; italics added.

spiritual. Wiredu observes that scholars trained in the West assumed that everyone thought in terms of their categories—or, more precisely, assumed that all educated people thought with and used their categories. As a case in point, Wiredu looks at the term ‘physical’. From a western, post-Enlightenment perspective, some entities (such as trees and cars) will be included in the ‘physical’ category, and others (such as the soul and God) will not. In the West, the line of reasoning is ‘if not physical, then spiritual’. Africans, however, do not apply these distinctions in this way. It is worth noting that Wiredu, like Mbiti, uses the word ‘ontology’ to describe what I am calling the single-tiered understanding of reality. Wiredu further observes that if a western scholar

finds out that Africans do not seem to view certain things, for example, the causes of some diseases, in the same light as he views what are called physical phenomena in his culture, he will suppose that Africans regard them as spiritual. The controlling dichotomy here, note, is ‘if not physical, then spiritual.’ Since the disparity in question is widespread, African ontology, according to our present source, would be brim-full of spiritual phenomena. Exactly this is what has happened, and the result is that Africans are credited, or more frankly, debited with a worldview in which almost everything is spiritual. ... [W]e must note immediately that we are encountering here the superimposition of a Western category of thought on African thought materials.<sup>109</sup>

Ogbu Kalu, too, has concluded that western interpretive theory is unable to explain the realities on the ground in Africa today. Elements such as ethnicity and religion that were supposed to be too primitive to withstand the insurgence of modernization have refused to die, and are in fact holding centre stage in social analysis. Sociologists speak about the ‘re-religionization of the world’ as a result of the breakdown of modernity, a process that has become obvious since the 1970s.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Kwasi Wiredu, ‘An Oral Philosophy of Personhood: Comments on Philosophy and Orality’, *Research in African Literatures* 40, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 9.

<sup>110</sup> Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*, 68.

Significantly, many social anthropologists agree with Kalu. The theories they were taught in the academy—that secularisation would naturally follow exposure to modernity in education, science, and technology, leading to the confinement of religion within the private sphere of personal commitment—do not appear to work in Africa. Religion has not lost its status in Africa, nor has it been subject to a sacred-secular divide. As Dickson pointed out, the secular social anthropologist's prediction that secularism would replace religion in the modern world simply did not happen.

Study African life and thought, though not as presented by social anthropologists, however useful their studies may be. Theological educators in Africa have every opportunity to study traditional religion and life 'live', for—as we have noted—while the static humanity which the social anthropologist tends to picture is largely fiction, despite the modern forces and the changes that have been brought about, the traditional ways of life and thought have not disappeared, and there is no indication that they ever will.<sup>111</sup>

Dickson's reference to 'static humanity' is reminiscent of the seminal work of Terence Ranger, who argued that Africa's traditional religions were never static, but robust and adaptive to changing circumstances. According to Ranger, people in African society exist on a continuum of religious belief and practice, with very few living their lives as exclusively traditional religionists, Catholics, Protestants, or Pentecostals. People do not exist autonomously from their surrounding religio-culture. Ranger therefore notes that, among the Kongo, both Christians and non-Christians

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<sup>111</sup> Dickson, *Theology in Africa*, 216. Desmond Tutu, using the more lively rhetoric of the preacher, writes, 'We are still too concerned to play the game according to the white man's rules when he often is the referee as well. ... Let us develop our insights about the corporateness of human existence in the face of excessive Western individualism, about the wholeness of the person when others are concerned for Hellenistic dichotomies of soul and body, about the reality of the spiritual when others are made desolate with the poverty of the material. Let African theology enthuse about the awesomeness of the transcendent when others are embarrassed to speak about the King, high and lifted up, whose train fills the temple. It is only when African theology is true to itself that it will go on to speak relevantly to the contemporary African—surely its primary task—and also, incidentally, make its valuable contribution to the rich Christian heritage which belongs to all of us.' Desmond Tutu, 'Whither African Theology', in *Christianity in Independent Africa*, ed. Edward Fasholé-Luke, Richard Gray, Adrian Hastings, and Godwin Tasie (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 369.

are all guided in their experience of the world by a system of thought that remains African and traditional rather than European and Christian. The persistence of traditional thought is not remarkable and calls for no explanation unless one first assumes that African beliefs must necessarily disintegrate in a world dominated by bureaucratic and capitalistic institutions.<sup>112</sup>

Birgit Meyer is likewise aware that the tools of anthropology struggle in attempts to understand the African context. In an article analysing Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches in Africa, Meyer traces the progression in theory among sociologists and anthropologists to make the point that the western penchant for separating the religious from the secular limited scholars' ability to fully appreciate the African context.<sup>113</sup> She agrees with Karen Fields, who challenges 'the often-implicit distinction between religion and the secular, which assumes that politics and religion essentially belong to separate spheres'.<sup>114</sup> Meyer argues that while scholarly lip service is given to the inseparability of sacred and secular, many anthropological studies tacitly make this distinction anyway. She then asserts that the 'master narrative of secularization' is inadequate for Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches.

Scholars recognized that, power being always 'rooted in the fusion of the secular and sacred worlds',<sup>115</sup> it was impossible to disentangle religion and politics. Yet at the same time they reflected on religion and politics in a modern framework, which stressed that both belonged to separate spheres. In retrospect, one can observe that the master narrative of secularization, which, if implicitly, informed theorizing about AICs' politics, collided with

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<sup>112</sup> Terence Ranger, 'The Churches, the Nationalist State and African Religion', in Fasholé-Luke, Gray, Hastings, and Tasie, 489.

<sup>113</sup> Meyer begins with the socio-structural approach of Durkheim, then the symbolic ethnography of Ranger and Fernandez, followed by the work of Van Binsbergen & Schoffeleers, and Karen Fields who use a combination of the first two, and finally to an understanding that it simply isn't possible to separate the sacred from the secular in the work of Karen Fields. See Birgit Meyer, 'Christianity in Africa: From African Independent to Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 447–50.

<sup>114</sup> Meyer, 'Christianity in Africa', 449–50.

<sup>115</sup> Emmanuel Akyeampong, *Drink, Power, and Cultural Change* (Oxford: Currey, 1996), 167.

the pressing realization that secularization made little sense with regard to the empirical context under study.<sup>116</sup>

Meyer concludes that secularization and modernization are ‘inadequate’ to explain what is happening in the rise of Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches: ‘the master narrative of secularization, which claims an intrinsic link between modernization and the decline of the public importance of religion, is inadequate to understand Pentecostal-Charismatic Church’s attraction and impact on the political as well as personal level’.<sup>117</sup>

Bennetta W. Jules-Rosette agrees with Meyer, arguing that the predictions of a number of prominent social theorists that religion would die as the influence of modernity increased have not been borne out. In their thinking, secularization promotes the falling away of religion—in the African context, however, the sacred-secular dichotomy never applied. Jules-Rosette argues that the tools developed by Durkheim, Weber, and Troeltsch in two-tiered, post-Enlightenment Europe are inadequate in single-tiered Africa. She agrees with Larry Shiner’s observation that when western scholars assume a spiritual/temporal divide, and apply this divide ‘to non-Western situations where such differentiations did not originally exist, we falsify the data’.<sup>118</sup> She rejects the idea that assumptions that have guided scholarship in the West will hold up everywhere. In support, she notes Peter Berger’s questioning of the notion of a universal ‘secularized consciousness’ that inevitably buys into the scientific worldview of the West and supplants the explanatory power of the sacred.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Meyer, ‘Christianity in Africa’, 464.

<sup>117</sup> Meyer, ‘Christianity in Africa’, 466.

<sup>118</sup> Bennetta W. Jules-Rosette, ‘Tradition and Continuity in African Religions: The Case of New Religious Movements’, in *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society*, ed. Jacob K. Olupona (St. Paul: Paragon, 1991), 154.

<sup>119</sup> Jules-Rosette writes, ‘Peter Berger suggests that recent research on religion often takes for granted the predominance of universal “secularized consciousness”, or total acceptance of a scientific reality, without considering the possibility that, for some people, the standard for cognitive validity may be the sacred, or

Gerhardus Oosthuizen makes a similar point, noting that in a time of rapid social change, urbanization, and cultural heterogeneity, Africa is a mix of Christianity, Islam, traditional religion, and secularism. However, modernity in the ‘closed-system’ form that has dominated the West, bringing a virtual end to metaphysics and religion as central to life, has not taken root in Africa. Indeed, the rise of post-modernity has brought the West into a closer affinity with the holistic worldview of Africa, reversing the rush to secularism.<sup>120</sup>

Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar offer a measured approach to the use of social science, using the tools of sociological analysis while also making reference to the underlying view of reality that their tools only describe in part. So, in discussing the statements of several leaders in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, and Ghana that attribute evil in these countries to the work of malevolent spiritual forces, Ellis and ter Haar point out that such reasoning is entirely logical given those African leader’s assumptions about how the world works. They recognize that westerners will immediately hear such descriptions ‘as religious’, and hence inadequate, but they are not sympathetic to that interpretation.<sup>121</sup> Nor is Robert Fisher, a social anthropologist who studied Akan culture in depth. He writes,

Without the correct understanding of the religious basis of reality, we cannot begin to grasp the West African worldview and the intense desire to succeed in life. When there is evil on hand to deal with, the West Africans will, through a bending with the wind, as it were, make the most of a bad situation and wait patiently for the solution to the problem. For ‘if Nyame

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a non-scientific reality.’ Jules-Rosette, ‘Tradition and Continuity’, 156–57. Kwame Gyekye would certainly fit Berger’s description of an African scholar refusing to fit into the mould of the West.

<sup>120</sup> See Gerhardus C. Oosthuizen, ‘The Place of Traditional Religion in Contemporary South Africa’, in Olupona, 36–37.

<sup>121</sup> Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar, ‘Religion and Politics in Sub-Saharan Africa’, *Journal of Modern African Studies* 36, no. 2 (1998): 186.



has brought the sickness, he will also provide the right medicine.’<sup>122</sup>

### 3.4 Analogical Continuity as a Pruning Tool

Analogical continuity looks for landing places that align with a forward trajectory in the articulation of biblical truth. In this it becomes a useful tool for what Andrew Walls called ‘the prime African theological quest’ of working out the proper relationship between Africa’s traditional religions and Christianity.<sup>123</sup> Analogical continuity uses the canonical Old and New Testaments as a filter that allows some elements of traditional religions through while blocking others. The fact that any elements can get through, however, is rooted in the similarity of the interpretive horizons that emerge from a single-tiered unitive perspective present in both the Akan primal universe and Scripture.

Particular instances of this filtering process can be cited: accepting that physical healing is real while rejecting the use of amulets; accepting the reality of the *abosom* while radically limiting their power and even dividing them between angelic beings in service to God and demonic ones in league with Satan; accepting the reality of prophecy while subjecting all prophecies to the rule of Scripture—these are just a few possible examples. Analogical continuity also helps reintroduce the pneumatic elements seen throughout Scripture to the church, particularly in the global North and West, where post-Enlightenment disenchantment has deprived it of the kind of vibrancy seen in the global South even after controlling for some of the excesses seen there. At the same time, however, it must be said that analogical continuity offers a tool that is better at opening a door than guarding it. Analogical continuity will always have to be used carefully and in concert with other theological tools, primarily the biblical text itself.

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<sup>122</sup> Robert B. Fisher, *West African Religious Traditions: Focus on the Akan of Ghana* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998), 102.

<sup>123</sup> Bediako, ‘Types of African Theology’, 58.

### 3.5 Untangling the Knot: Two Case Studies

In this concluding section I will use analogical continuity derived from the single-tiered unitive perspective on reality as a tool to analyse the thinking of two critics of the possibility of continuity. Byang Kato and Okot p'Bitek are two very different people, as we shall see, but both can help shed light on the significance of locating continuity in the single-tiered unitive perspective underlying reality in both the African cosmology and the biblical worldview.

#### 3.5.1 Byang Kato: A Case Study

Byang Kato fears that seeking out points of continuity between the Christian faith and traditional religions will have the inevitable effect of making African Christianity a syncretistic religion. Kato recognizes that traditional religions emerge out of what he calls a 'dichotomic' view of reality as made up of the material (*linam*) and the immaterial (*hyong*).<sup>124</sup> He is unable, however, to see in these the same ontological realities evident in Scripture. Consequently, he fails to see the possibility of analogical continuities in what he would call the clear light of Scripture. I believe, however, that a close reading of Kato reveals that he struggles to make his case for syncretism—not because the danger is not real, but because his own description of the African ontological reality points to continuities. His training and his fear of syncretism force him to deny, or to label counterfeit, the resonances he observes.

This denial leads to certain tensions that appear in Kato's work. We see this, for example, in his account of a woman who predicted, under the influence of a spirit, that a white man would come to Kagoro and tell them about *Gwaza*, the Supreme Being. That

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<sup>124</sup> Byang H. Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Nairobi: Evangel, 1987), 36. Without prejudice, it should be noted that Kato got his PhD from Dallas Theological Seminary in the United States. His training took place within a dispensational theological framework that is completely Western and subject to all the tacit two-tiered prejudices. Perhaps most notably, dispensationalists for the most part deny that miracles have taken place since the time of the first-century church.

white man came in the person of a missionary who told them about Jesus, and now sixty per cent of the Kagoro are Christians. Kato tells us that this same woman, prophesying again under the influence of a spirit ‘consoled the bereaved mother of the chief of Kagoro with this prophecy, “Do not weep. You will bring forth another son who will become a chief”’. That prophecy was also fulfilled in the person of Awon who, Kato writes, ‘has been a chief for 28 years and has been one of the best chiefs in the Northern States of Nigeria’.<sup>125</sup>

The internal tensions in Kato’s work continue as he describes other supernatural phenomena, including women able to accomplish supernatural feats, perform exorcisms, or sense the reality of Satan in their midst. Kato’s challenge is how to explain these events when they occur in a pre-Christian context. His solution is to suggest that they are an echo of the Garden of Eden in the deep memories of the people, which missionaries ought now to nurture and fan back into flame. In this sense, Kato is actually drawing on the common interpretive landscape of his own African context and the world of the Bible. Indeed, Kato uses the Genesis account to describe what remains after the Fall as a small flame or spark that can be fanned into flame among adherents of traditional religions. This is more than a simple acknowledgement of ‘general revelation’ through creation—the heavens declaring the glory of God. Kato is invoking instead the reality of a world where God inspired Africans to speak prophetically before missionaries arrived; it is a world of the *linam* and *hyong*, both in Eden and in Africa prior to the arrival of the missionaries. Kato allows for the presence of real ‘vestiges’ of Edenic memory in traditional religions, and sees that they can serve as a point of connection between traditional religions and Christianity.

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<sup>125</sup> Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 36.

Clues, weak clues at that, are the supernatural vestiges in the unbeliever; only the faint steps that man is more than flesh and blood. They are indications that the Supernatural has been here, and that at one time men “heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day” (Genesis 3:8a).<sup>126</sup>

I would suggest that Kato’s own commitment to Scripture has ultimately led him to a nuanced recognition and use of what I am calling ‘analogical continuity’. We should not be surprised by this, considering that he is wholeheartedly committed to the literal reality of the biblical worldview. This is not to deny, however, that Kato goes very hard after those who would try to make traditional religions pre-Christian. In this he is just as insistent as p’Bitek.<sup>127</sup>

Kato concludes his book *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* with a ten-point program for ‘Safeguarding Biblical Christianity in Africa’ from the twin dangers of syncretism and universalism. The first is worth considering because, as Kato describes his own context, it is one in which the spiritual and the material, the *linam* and *hyong*, hold together. The first item on his list is, ‘Adhere to the basic presuppositions of historic Christianity ... [that] general revelation, though it cannot be read correctly, is still a *de facto* revelation.’ As we have noted, when Kato speaks of ‘general revelation’, he is speaking in the context of the ontological reality of both the *linam* and *hyong*. Just as importantly, however, Kato actually does allow for true revelation beyond the general—as seen in the prophetess of the Kagoro.<sup>128</sup> This makes sense in a ‘dichotomic’ world.

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<sup>126</sup> Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 38. Indeed, it is hard to see how this differs substantially from what Mbiti calls ‘preparation for the Gospel’ in ATRs.

<sup>127</sup> After suggesting that Mbiti took his data and described it in terms of his own Christian theological categories, which are not to be found in the original sources, Kato writes, ‘The rationale behind all this is to convince the world that the African has always known and worshipped the true God, and is based upon the assumption that many items in African traditional life, ideas and practices can and have to be taken as a *praeparatio evangelica*’. He concludes, ‘To say that Africans, or anyone else, still have the vestiges of *Imago Dei*, by virtue of which they are still aware of the existence of the Supreme Being, is one thing. But to systematize the concepts and fill them up with quality of worship of God ‘in truth and in spirit’ is foreign to Biblical Christianity.’ Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 71, 75.

<sup>128</sup> Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 181–82.

So, in spite of his protestations against the possibility of continuity between Africa's traditional religions and biblical Christianity, Kato has himself set the stage for analogical continuity, even giving examples of it from his own experience.

### 3.5.2 Okot p'Bitek: A Case Study

In *African Religions in Western Scholarship*, published in 1970, Okot p'Bitek argues that the attempt to find continuity between the Supreme God(s) of Africa's traditional religions and the Supreme God of Christianity, Judaism, or Islam is both illegitimate and unnecessary. He calls for African scholars to begin studying the African people 'as they really are', thus striking a blow against what he sees as two errors made by western scholars.<sup>129</sup>

The first error p'Bitek identifies is the evolutionary approach to African religions. P'Bitek argues that 'western scholars had to justify the colonial system, hence the need for the myth of the "primitive". The African scholar has nothing of the sort to justify.'<sup>130</sup> Attacking the notion of the evolutionary progression of religion as a western invention to prop up its own superiority, p'Bitek writes,

We need not go into a critique of the idea of 'progress', which, as I have stated above, is only the other side of the coin of the myth of the 'primitive'. Nor is it necessary to discuss at any length, the concepts of 'fetishism' or 'animism', because these were not African religions, but what the eighteenth century philosophers and the nineteenth century anthropologists supposed were African concepts. The missionaries planning a 'dialogue between christianity and animism' waste their time, because there is no such religion as animism in Africa.<sup>131</sup>

In opposing the evolutionary bias of western scholars, especially those of the early nineteenth century, p'Bitek would get no argument from African Christian theologians.

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<sup>129</sup> Okot p'Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1970), 7.

<sup>130</sup> P'Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship*, 7.

<sup>131</sup> P'Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship*, 44.

However, p'Bitek levels a second charge, namely that even friendly scholars—and he has in mind here his own supervisor, E. E. Evans-Pritchard—illegitimately argued that the African God is also the Christian God. P'Bitek will have no part in these efforts, for he argues that 'the interpretation of African deities in terms of the Christian God does not help us to understand the nature of the African deities as African peoples conceive them'.<sup>132</sup> In particular, p'Bitek argues that western scholars 'Hellenized' African traditional religions in an attempt to give them a weight in western scholarly communities that would justify their own research along with the African religions themselves.<sup>133</sup> P'Bitek sees this as unnecessary, because Africa's traditional religions are under no obligation to meet the West's standards. More significantly, however, he argues that African thinking is material rather than metaphysical, here-and-now rather than future-oriented. In his view, to apply Greek terms is to fundamentally change what Africans meant when they described their own gods.

When students of African religions describe African deities as eternal, omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient, etc., they intimate that African deities have identical attributes with those of the Christian God. In other words, they suggest that Africans Hellenized their deities, but before coming into contact with Greek metaphysical thinking.<sup>134</sup>

This idea he will, of course, reject.

African peoples may describe their deities as 'strong' but not 'omnipotent'; 'wise', not 'omniscient'; 'old', not 'eternal', 'great', not 'omnipresent'. The Greek metaphysical terms are meaningless in African thinking.<sup>135</sup>

P'Bitek's critique then is two-fold. First, Africa's gods are Africa's gods, and Africans have nothing to hang their heads over—Africa's gods do not have to conform

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<sup>132</sup> P'Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship*, 50.

<sup>133</sup> P'Bitek's argument that Hellenistic categories were imposed onto Africa's traditional religions is undercut by the work of numerous scholars—including Terence Ranger and Darrel Whiteman, who will be discussed below—who have demonstrated the non-static nature of religion.

<sup>134</sup> P'Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship*, 80.

<sup>135</sup> P'Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship*, 88.

to western ideals to be worthy. On this point, p'Bitek goes hard after John Mbiti's assertion that all African people groups believe in a Supreme Creator God. P'Bitek, through his study of the Luo (of which he was a member), argues that Mbiti's statement is demonstrably false, as the Luo themselves do not have such a God.<sup>136</sup> Second, p'Bitek argues that the efforts of African Christian scholars who think they are adding status to Africa's gods by using Hellenistic designations to translate Africa's own descriptive terminology are both unnecessary and wrong.

Applying the analogical continuity tool to p'Bitek's two-fold critique, we can accept the validity of his observations. Africa's traditional religions should indeed be studied according to their own ideas, and are under no obligation to fit into some western model. If the Luo tradition does not include a Supreme Creator God, then Mbiti's assertion is, at least in this instance, incorrect. At the same time, however, we may note that it is direct continuity, not analogical continuity, that would require the Luo to recognize a Supreme God before acknowledging the existence of continuity between Luo traditional religion and the Christian faith. Analogical continuity argues, instead, for continuity at the deeper level of the single-tiered understanding of reality—and this p'Bitek does not deny.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> P'Bitek quotes John Mbiti: 'I assume in this book [*Concepts of God in Africa*] that there is but One Supreme God. I take it also that the majority of the concepts presented here, have sprung independently out of African reflection on God.' John S. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa* (London: SPCK, 1970), xiii; quoted in p'Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship*, 61. In *The Religion of the Central Luo* (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1971), p'Bitek presents his research to demonstrate that the Luo had no conception of a Supreme God. It should be noted, however, that the Luo writer Dennis Okoth and B. A. Ogot argue that the Luo do, in fact, have a Supreme God. Dennis Okoth, 'Luo Animistic Beliefs and Religious Practitioners and How to Reconcile Them to Christ'. Communicating Christ among Folk Religionists, 2002, <http://www.missiology.org/old/folkreligion/articleokoth.htm>; B. A. Ogot, 'Traditional Religion and the Precolonial History of Africa: The Example of the Padhola', *Uganda Journal* 31, no. 1 (1967): 111–16, <http://www.africabib.org/rec.php?RID=18886010X>.

<sup>137</sup> For example, p'Bitek argues that scholars must lay aside the notion that God is unknowable. He says that Africans do know their gods by what they do—hence the efficacy of diviners, who can tell which divinity has been offended and needs to be appeased. See Chapter Twelve of *African Religions in Western Scholarship*.

At most, then, p'Bitek has made the case that direct continuity is suspect. Since he himself admits the presence of the underlying single-tiered unitive perspective, the door is wide open for analogical continuity that follows the trajectory established by the bridges, landing places, and lines of congruence we have discussed. Analogical continuity is able to identify and make use of these various bridges and landing places even among the Luo because of the single-tiered understanding of reality they share with the Bible. As Andrew Walls would argue, they operate with the same fundamental map of the universe. To legitimately rule out analogical continuity, p'Bitek would have to find a religio-culture in which the single-tiered structure itself is absent. His research, of course, has revealed no such thing.

At this point, the work of Terence Ranger and Darrel Whiteman becomes important.<sup>138</sup> Both of these scholars argue that religion is never static. As change is introduced into societies, especially those that are religio-cultures, their religious understanding and practices respond, with change occurring along logical trajectories determined by the understanding of reality already present among the indigenes. It is the local people who determine what is acceptable and what is not. As Whiteman demonstrates, when Christianity appears in a new area, the people within that society determine what they will accept and what they will reject. Crucially, Whiteman underscores the fact that a new idea introduced into a culture must find a place to land within the worldview of the recipient culture if it is to 'stick'.

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<sup>138</sup> See Terence Ranger, 'The Churches, the Nationalist State and African religion', in Fasholé-Luke, Gray, Hastings, and Tasie, 479–502; Darrel Whiteman, *Melanesians and Missionaries* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1983). See also Rosalind I. J. Hackett, 'Revitalization in African Tradition Religion', in Olupona, 135–148; and Greene, 'Religion, History and the Supreme Gods of Africa', 122–138. An interesting case study demonstrating the adaptive, non-static nature of traditional religions appears in Lemme Tamilwai Baruti, 'The Practice of Easter Morning Service and Its Theological Implication into Christian Faith: In North-Eastern Diocese of Lutheran Church of Tanzania' (MTh thesis, Norwegian School of Theology, 2011), 58. Baruti's work demonstrates, however, that the Lutherans have not yet taken full advantage of the situation and significant confusion exists.



The introduced cultural form or idea (novelty) must connect with a configuration in the mind of the potential recipient if it is to have meaning. ... Unless some kind of meaning can be assigned to an introduced novelty it will not survive in the new cultural context. It will be rejected by the potential recipients.<sup>139</sup>

Whiteman's research clearly puts the recipient of new ideas in the decision-making role with regard to what to receive and what to reject. In the case of p'Bitek's example of the Luo, then, there may not be direct continuity between a god who is strong, wise, old, and great and one who is omnipotent, omniscient, eternal, and omnipresent. Nonetheless, these descriptives can serve as lines of congruence, allowing the Luo to say, in effect, 'our word "wise" may not have meant in the past what "omniscient" meant to the Greeks, but as we think about what we meant by "wise", we see that "omniscient" is a logical next step in our own understanding of the God we believe exists'. At the same time, analogical continuity requires that the meaning of 'wise', 'strong', 'old', and 'great' be fully understood in their African context, with the expectation that they might add to the Christian theological understanding of God.

My reading of p'Bitek is that his view of Africa's traditional religions was too static, not allowing for development or change. He himself believed that modernity would sound the death knell for Africa's traditional religions: after posing the question, 'Will the African deities survive the revolutions in science and philosophy which have killed the Christian God?', he answered, 'I doubt it'. Yet he acknowledges that most Africans still live with a foot in both their Christian/Muslim and traditional worlds.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Whiteman, *Melanesians and Missionaries*, 10. See also Ben Knighton, 'Christian Enculturation in the Two-Thirds World', in *Global Christianity: Contested Claims*, ed. Wijzen Schreier (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 51–68. Knighton's argument for the term 'enculturation' supports Whiteman's work.

<sup>140</sup> p'Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship*, 113.

This suggests that by this point p'Bitek was, ironically, thinking and drawing his conclusions as a secular, western-trained anthropologist.<sup>141</sup>

Terence Ranger describes the changes he observed in African traditional religions as a 'religious reformulation of community'.<sup>142</sup> P'Bitek does not appear to allow for such 'religious reformulation'. A static picture of traditional religions rejects change, but Ranger's view suggests that traditional religions have the ability to incorporate new ideas into their own idioms. Analogical continuity affirms this process and uses it to put traditional religions and Christianity into conversation on the basis of their shared single-tiered interpretive landscape. After all, both p'Bitek and the first-generation African Christian scholars he opposed were analysing a world in which both material and spiritual cause and effect are necessary, where the natural and supernatural are not strictly divisible, and where a robust permeability between these two worlds is a part of people's perceived daily experience. Analogical continuity rooted in the single-tiered unitive perspective offers a methodological approach that is critical and realistic, affirming that words are referential, yet insisting that their meanings must be considered critically—'wise' does not necessarily mean 'omniscient'. Further, analogical continuity recognizes the validity of both the localized focus of p'Bitek's work and the observations of overlapping similarities by African Christian scholars. When we understand that both traditional religions and Christianity are, to use John V. Taylor's

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<sup>141</sup> As mentioned at the start of this chapter, the western-trained social scientist Sandra Greene set out to find a way through the impasse that exists between the so-called 'Devout' scholars (Mbiti, Idowu, and Parrinder) and the 'De-Hellenists' (p'Bitek and Horton). The former asserted the real possibility of continuity on the basis that prior to the coming of either Christianity or Islam Africa already believed in a Supreme God. The latter argued that this was a fantasy fabricated for the purpose of refuting the evolutionary study of religion. Greene made two contributions in her article. First, she observed that a supreme god was present in some, but not all, ATRs. Second, she suggested a theoretical approach to explain how those conceptions of god within ATRs changed over time by emphasizing the importance of historical, political, and economic factors. Greene's argument, however, does not appear to me to advance much, if at all, beyond Ranger's work. Indeed, her renewed reliance on material causality might even be a step backwards.

<sup>142</sup> Ranger, 'Churches, the Nationalist State and African Religion', 497.

term, ‘traditions of response’ to the single-tiered unitive world that is the work of the Supreme Creator God, then we can readily acknowledge continuity without demanding that it be direct.<sup>143</sup> Local variation is no longer a problem.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have argued that analogical continuity—rooted in the single-tiered unitive perspective on reality that is found in both Africa’s primal ‘ontological past’ and the worldview of the Bible—is a useful tool for locating continuity between Africa’s traditional religions and Christianity. Whether we enter the conversation through the door of the single-tiered unitive perspective, as with Frank Kwesi Adams’s analysis of *Odwira*, or through the door of ‘God has spoken to all peoples at all times’, as with Pashington Obeng’s analysis of Roman Catholic practices among the Asante, analogical continuity helps us construct an understanding of a Christian faith that has every right to claim its place as a non-western, African religion.

By keeping the map of the universe shared by African primal tradition and the worldview of the Bible front and centre, we gain a new tool with which to clear away much of the confusion that has arisen over the question of continuity. By applying this tool of analogical continuity to the objections of two key African thinkers, Byang Kato and Okot p’Bitek, who see little or no possibility for continuity between Africa’s traditional religions and Christianity, we opened up new areas of dialogue. For Kato, analogical continuity makes a place for the Kagoro prophetess; in p’Bitek’s case, it provides room for Africans to lead a conversation about how to describe God—wise/omniscient, strong/omnipotent, old/eternal, and so on. Where direct continuity is

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<sup>143</sup> See Chapter Nine of John V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God* (London, SCM Press, 1972).

rare and offers little common ground for conversation, analogical continuity is common and shows promise for increased understanding.

Finally, the presence of the single-tiered unitive perspective and the interpretive landscape it produces opens up a rich vein of analogical continuity between Africa's traditional religions and Christianity, especially its thoroughly indigenized, fully Trinitarian iteration.<sup>144</sup> Further, by establishing Africa's conversion of its primal past on the sound footing of biblical revelation accessed through the process of analogical continuity, African theologians offer the global church a tool that can be used within other religio-cultures. This, in turn, will attack the roots of the fact-faith divide seen in so much of the West, for while the 'religio' element of 'religio-culture' may appear dim in the West, I believe Bediako is right to insist that it has not disappeared.

The next two chapters will serve as test cases for the application of analogical continuity. In Chapter Five, I will look in detail at how Akan religio-culture provides categories for understanding Christology that do not exist in the West. In Chapter Six, I will do the same with Mercy Amba Oduyoye's argument for the full equality of men and women located in the primal Akan anthropology. In both cases, categories that emerge out of Akan religio-culture function as bridges for those desiring to travel between Africa's traditional religions and Christianity—whether as converts or as dialogue partners. At the same time, these chapters will demonstrate that analogical continuity is a dangerously blunt tool unless it is carefully guided by biblical truth, which is alone able to decide what, as Andrew Walls said, can be retained from the old

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<sup>144</sup> Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu uses the term 'pneumatic' to describe the current theological scene in Ghana. The challenge is how to describe what is happening in Africa without using the word 'Pentecostal', with its western connotations. For this reason, I prefer the term 'fully Trinitarian', because all three persons of the Godhead are present and at work as observed in Scripture.

for constructing the new. In other words, analogical continuity can provide a door into the Christian faith, but does not predict the final theological results.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Using the Nana/Ancestor Category to Frame a Christological Conversation between Kwame Bediako, John Pobee and Other Akan Theological Voices**

#### **1. THE SINGLE-TIERED ONTOLOGY AS A HERMENEUTICAL LENS**

In Chapters One, Two, and Three, I made the case for the existence and importance of the single-tiered unitive perspective on reality and the interpretive landscape that results. I have argued that it is within this enlarged interpretive landscape that Akan Christian theologies are being constructed. In this chapter, I will use the single-tiered unitive perspective as a hermeneutical lens to examine and analyse the Christological conversation between Kwame Bediako, John Pobee, and other theologians from within the Akan Christian community, all of whom draw upon an understanding of ancestors emerging from this single-tiered perspective and landscape.

Using the single-tiered perspective as my hermeneutical lens allows me to take advantage of the Akan interpretive landscape, particularly the category of ancestors, to look at Akan formulations of Christology. At the same time, using this lens provides a way to pinpoint why weight is given to one argument over another, where nuances appear that might otherwise be overlooked, and where inconsistencies weaken particular arguments. As we explore these discussions, we will see why the single-tiered perspective is a significant element in these theologians' contributions to the global Christian theological conversation.

#### **1.1 Why Christology as a 'Test Case'?**

I have picked the Christological conversation both for its inherent importance and because, as in the case of the early church, Christology was one of the first doctrines to

receive careful and sustained attention in its new African context.<sup>1</sup> Africa's first generation of theologians,<sup>2</sup> particularly J. B. Danquah, wrote extensively on the doctrine of God, in part to refute the false notion that Africa's traditional religions were polytheistic. Scholars of Mbiti's generation and following, however, almost immediately began to write on Christology, beginning a flow of books and articles on the topic that continues to the present. And, of course, it was J. B. Danquah who drew the connection between *Nyame* and *Nana*/ancestor,<sup>3</sup> a point later picked up by both Pobee and Bediako as they constructed their Christologies. Further, the sheer volume and depth of work done on Christology by African Christian scholars certainly gives answer to the Roman Catholic missionary scholar, Adrian Hastings, who worried that

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<sup>1</sup> Diane Stinton's *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004) provides a very helpful survey of important work on Christology by Jean-Marc Ela, Benezet Bujo, John Mbiti, John Pobee, Mercy Oduyoye, and J. N. K. Mugambi, as well as conversations with African pastors and Roman Catholic sisters commenting on various aspects of Christology. In a later article ('Africa's Contribution to Christology', in *African Theology Comes of Age*, ed. Laurenti Magesa [Nairobi: Paulines, 2010], 13–34), Stinton discusses the work of the first ESEAT publication (*Jesus in African Christianity: Experimentation and Diversity in African Christology*, ed. J. N. K. Mugambi and Laurenti Magesa [Nairobi: Initiatives, 1989]), along with the pioneering African theologians Harry Sawyerr, Kwesi Dickson, and Charles Nyamiti. John Pobee, an early major voice in Christological thinking himself, edited an entire volume on *Exploring Afro-Christology* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1992) that includes essays by nine African scholars, one Caribbean, and two African-Americans. The Nigerian scholar V. I. Ezigbo received his PhD in 2008 from the University of Edinburgh with a dissertation titled 'Contextualizing the Christ-Event: A Christological Study of the Interpretations and Appropriations of Jesus Christ in Nigerian Christianity'. *African Christology: Jesus in Post-Missionary African Christianity* by Clifton Clarke (Eugene: Pickwick, 2011) and *Akan Christology* by Charles Sarpong Aye-Addo (Eugene: Pickwick, 2013) are recent additions by scholars working within the Akan community. Timothy Hartman's unpublished dissertation, 'Revelation, Religion, and Culture in Kwame Bediako and Karl Barth' (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 2014), indicates that African Christological thought is now entering into a closer conversation with the western theological tradition. Roar G. Fotland's *Ancestor Christology in Context: Theological Perspectives of Kwame Bediako* (Bergen: University of Bergen, 2005) is a careful reading of Bediako's Christology. Finally, a recent *Festschrift* compiles essays by a number of Bediako's students and friends exploring themes important in Bediako's work, with three articles focusing specifically on Bediako's Christology: Gillian Mary Bediako, Benhardt Y. Quarshie, and J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, eds., *Seeing New Facets of the Diamond: Christianity as a Universal Faith – Essays in Honour of Kwame Bediako* (Akropong-Akuapem: Regnum Africa, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Pobee and Bediako build on critical work done by Akan scholars in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. See J. B. Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God* (London: Lutterworth, 1944) K. A. Busia, *The Position of the Chief in the Modern Political System of Ashanti* (London: Oxford University Press, 1951) and *Africa in Search of Democracy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967)—and, of course, the corpus of John Mbiti.

<sup>3</sup> In *The Akan Doctrine of God*, Danquah includes an extensive discussion on the meaning and use of *Nana*, including using the phrase 'Great Ancestor', though not in reference to Jesus.

looking to Africa's primal past would rob African Christian theology of important doctrinal categories—including, most significantly for Hastings, Christology—because they lacked counterparts in African traditional religions. Kwame Bediako, writing in 1996, addressed Hastings's fear directly when he noted that African theologians were, in fact, writing on Christology using categories taken directly from the African context. Jesus was being written about and understood as *Healer*, *Master of Initiation*, and *Ancestor* or *Great Ancestor*, 'all of which were derived directly from the apprehension of reality and of the Transcendent as experienced within the world-views of African primal religions'.<sup>4</sup> Bediako could hardly be clearer about deriving his categories from the single-tiered frame of reference.

## 2. RELIGIO-CULTURE AND CHRISTOLOGY

We have already seen how Akan religio-culture is firmly rooted in the soil of the single-tiered unitive perspective on reality. The Akan scholars we will consider in this chapter know that they must answer the questions posed by that religio-culture. Kwame Bediako, for example, does not himself use the term 'religio-culture', but I would suggest that the idea is tacitly present virtually every time he uses the word 'culture' in reference to his own Akan context. By recognizing that Akan culture is 'religio-culture', we can understand why Bediako was so critical of the West's inability during the colonial missionary period to recognize that God had already revealed himself to Africa. Bediako can hardly mask his disdain for E. B. Tylor's coining of the term 'animism' when in all likelihood he had 'never encountered the people whose religious

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<sup>4</sup> Kwame Bediako, 'Types of African Theology', in *Christianity in Africa in the 1990s*, ed. Christopher Fyfe and Andrew F. Walls (Edinburgh: Centre of African Studies, 1996), 62.



life he thus designated'.<sup>5</sup> Bediako certainly considered absurd the 1910 Edinburgh Conference's conclusion that Africa had no knowledge of God which the gospel could use or build upon. Bediako summarizes the attitude of the West as follows: 'everything pre-Christian in Africa' would be treated as 'either harmful or at best valueless' and 'the African once converted from paganism became a sort of *tabula rasa* on which a wholly new religious psychology was somehow to be imprinted'.<sup>6</sup> Bediako, on the other hand, insists that the biblical God is embedded within the ancestral religious story of every people. For this reason, he is also critical of African Christians who do not give voice to their own primal pasts in formulating their understanding of the gospel:

Perhaps part of our situation of theological crisis has to do with the fact that we in the Southern continents are having our own struggle in coming to the realization that Christianity is a world faith in a decidedly post-Western phase, making it possible to explore pathways in Christian theology that take as their primary matrix the new theatres and arenas of Christian vitality.<sup>7</sup>

Bediako knows that theology is about asking and answering the questions posed to the gospel by the (religio-)culture in which people live and move. Echoing Ogbu Kalu, Bediako writes that the real task of theology is 'the quest for, and the formulation of, Christian responses to culturally rooted questions'.<sup>8</sup>

Bediako is not only concerned with the ability of Akan religio-culture to ask and answer the questions it needs to ask of the gospel. He is also keenly interested in driving

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<sup>5</sup> Kwame Bediako, 'Why Has the Summer Ended and We Are Not Saved? Encountering the Real Challenge of Christian Engagement in Primal Contexts', *Journal of African Christian Thought* 11, no. 2 (December 2008): 6.

<sup>6</sup> See Bediako, 'Why Has the Summer Ended', 6. Bediako is using at this point the assessment of Adrian Hastings who also noted this deficiency in the colonial missionary attitude.

<sup>7</sup> Bediako, 'Why Has the Summer Ended', 6.

<sup>8</sup> Bediako, 'Why Has the Summer Ended', 5. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu notes that in this matter Bediako was 'one of the first conservative evangelical theologians of our time to engage critically with the issues of Christianity and culture by positively affirming the African religious past as containing elements that prepared the continent for the appropriation of the gospel.' See 'Kwame Bediako and the Eternal Christological Question', in Bediako, Quarshie, and Asamoah-Gyadu, 49–50.

home the point that his own Akan people have a memory of God embedded within their ancestors' religious story. Without that memory, Bediako argues, the Akan would come to Christ as orphans who do not know who they are. Furthermore, he asks what kind of God would share nothing of himself with the people of Africa prior to the appearance of western missionaries.

If we cannot have a pre-Christian memory of the living God on the grounds that the living God, 'the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ', has had no connection with our past, what are the grounds for our confidence that the living God has anything to do with our present?<sup>9</sup>

For Bediako, and for the Akan in general, it is now possible 'to relate the gospel to whatever may be our heritage of religions, culture, history and language in a new way, instead of considering them as merely "non-Christian" systems of belief, morals and social observance that should be discarded'.<sup>10</sup> Bediako thus asserts that his own Akan religio-culture 'is in fact the very place where Christ desires to meet us in order to transform us into his own image'.<sup>11</sup>

Religio-culture gives Kwame Bediako and John Pobee—along with every other Akan theologian we will consider here—the ontological and linguistic tools to formulate an Akan Christology. This perspective, in turn, produced the rich interpretive landscape in which Akan scholars found the *Nana*/ancestor category. As we will see, it is this category that they used to help construct their understanding of Jesus. Bediako is explicit on this point, arguing that the African understanding of reality presents a needed corrective for what he sees as the untenable dichotomization of epistemology in

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<sup>9</sup> Bediako, 'Why Has the Summer Ended', 6. Bediako notes that Paul certainly accepted the pre-Christian testimony of God to himself in other than just Judaism when in Rom 3.29–30 he asked: 'Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith' (NIV).

<sup>10</sup> Bediako, 'Why Has the Summer Ended', 7.

<sup>11</sup> Bediako, 'Why Has the Summer Ended', 7.

the West. He writes, ‘beginning from the basic apprehension of the universe as a unified cosmic, essentially spiritual, system, we have been able to ... offer guidance towards an organic view of the knowledge of truth—increasingly felt to be desirable in Christian theology’.<sup>12</sup>

### 3. *NANA*/ANCESTOR IN AKAN RELIGIO-CULTURE

Since both Kwame Bediako and John Pobee use the *Nana*/ancestor category in their Christological thinking, we must begin with a discussion of the role and significance of ancestors within Akan culture.<sup>13</sup> In summary, ancestors are regarded as the ‘living dead’.<sup>14</sup> They are considered to be part of the community of the living, functioning as guardians of the community’s moral standards, bestowers of blessings on the community, and mediators between *Onyankopon* (the one Supreme God) and the people. Because Akan religio-culture places hope in the mediatorial powers of the ancestors, Akan theologians find in this category a way to speak of Jesus’ own mediatorial role. However, the word ‘ancestor’ expresses only part of the Twi lexical horizon for *Nana*, which includes the idea of ancestor but, like the Greek word *Christos*, can be a name, a title, and a function, providing an analogical landing place for Jesus as redeemer, saviour, and Lord. Both Bediako and John Pobee make use of this expanded lexical context, and Pobee in particular draws on the idea of *Nana* as ‘chief’ in

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<sup>12</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 210

<sup>13</sup> Bediako has extensive discussions of the ancestors in *Jesus in African Culture (A Ghanaian Perspective)* (Accra: Asempa, 1990), and *Christianity in Africa*. John Pobee does the same in *Toward an African Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979).

<sup>14</sup> The phrase is John Mbiti’s and is used extensively by numerous African Christian theologians. Christian G. Baeta wrote similarly when he commented that Africans ‘live with their dead’. Christian G. Baeta, ‘The Challenge of African Culture to the Church, and the Message of the Church to African Culture’, in *Christianity and African Culture: The Proceedings of a Conference Held at Accra, Gold Coast, May 2nd–6th, 1955 under the Auspices of the Christian Council* (Accra: Christian Council of the Gold Coast, 1955); quoted in Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 216.

formulating his Christology. That being said, both Pobee and Bediako also engage directly and at length with the ancestors themselves as they formulate their ideas.

### 3.1 The Significance of Ancestors for African Christians

The ancestors are significant for two main reasons. First, they represent a living, breathing spiritual community, pointing to a more robust, unified natural and supernatural world than western Christianity can comprehend. When John Mbiti presented Bediako with a copy of one of his books, he wrote on the flyleaf, ‘Their past is also our present’. Bediako understood precisely what Mbiti meant because he himself already believed that ‘in the purposes of God’ Christians ‘need’ their pre-Christian ancestors.<sup>15</sup> The West, having lost its connection with its own ancestors, now needs the African world-view and its ‘basic apprehension of the universe as a unified cosmic, essentially spiritual, system’ to elucidate the gospel more clearly.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, ‘the place and significance of ancestors in the African primal world-view actually offers opportunities for “filling out” some dimensions of spiritual experience and historical consciousness which are inherent in the Christian religion’ but largely lost to the western church.<sup>17</sup>

While a list of spiritual entities in the Akan cosmos in order of power would begin with *Onyankopon*, include the *abosom* and spirits, and end with the ancestors, both Bediako and Pobee point out that, in practice, the Akan take the ancestors more seriously than they do the *abosom*.<sup>18</sup> Their reasoning is that if an Akan goes to a shrine

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<sup>15</sup> Bediako, ‘Why Has the Summer Ended’, 8.

<sup>16</sup> Bediako gives credit to Geoffrey Parrinder and Edwin Smith for alerting him to the potential in using the African world-view in this way. However, where they saw ‘left-overs’ from Africa’s primal past, Bediako saw divine purpose.

<sup>17</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 212.

<sup>18</sup> For a helpful discussion of the place of the *abosom* in the life of the Akan, see Ernestina Afriyie’s article, ‘*Abosom* (*Onyame mma* – Children of God) and Jesus Christ (the Son of God): An Engagement of

and the deity fails them, they simply move on to the next shrine. In other words, the *abosom* are of use only when they are successful in aiding the supplicant. The ancestors, on the other hand, cannot be disregarded so long as they remain a part of the living community. As Bediako puts it, ‘the ancestors form the most prominent element in the Akan religious outlook and provide the essential focus of piety’.<sup>19</sup> For Bediako and Pobee, it is this living relationship between the ancestors and the community, rather than the ancestors’ technical rank in the hierarchy of spiritual beings, that is the source of their importance in the Akan world.<sup>20</sup>

Both Pobee and Bediako describe the importance of the ancestors in terms of power. This does not mean that the ancestors are worshipped—ancestors are never confused with *Onyankopon*.<sup>21</sup> Instead, ancestors serve as a regulative focus for the

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the Intermediary Role of *Abosom* in Akan Religion with that of Jesus Christ in the Christian Faith’, in Bediako, Quarshie, and Asamoah-Gyadu, 261–68. Afriyie argues that Jesus accomplishes for the people everything promised by the *abosom*; however, the *abosom* are never used as a category for Christology.

<sup>19</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture*, 11.

<sup>20</sup> Aye-Addo disagrees on this point. He argues that people ask for their ancestors to mediate on their behalf because they know their ancestors and feel comfortable approaching the Supreme God through them – even if they are less powerful ontologically than the spirits. The Akan rely on the ancestors because they are still ‘people’ and knowable as such. Aye-Addo writes that this is why ‘so many African theologians are quick to construct African Christologies around the concept of the ancestor, sometimes without sufficient critical and analytical inquiry into the appropriateness of the concept’. Aye-Addo, *Akan Christology*, 39.

<sup>21</sup> Bediako combines the insights of an Akan chief, Nana Addo Dankwa, and anthropologist Meyer Fortes to establish that the Akan venerate but do not worship ancestors. See his *Christianity in Africa*, 217ff. Bediako also discusses the issue of veneration or worship as it pertains to ‘chiefs’ in ‘Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religions’ in *Sharing Jesus in the Two Thirds World*, ed. Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 115–75. A lively debate exists within the literature on this question of ‘worship’ versus ‘veneration’. See Peter Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect* (Accra: Ghana Publishing), 42; Peter Sarpong, ‘Christianity Meets Traditional African Cultures’, in *Faith Meets Faith*, ed. G. H. Anderson and T. F. Stransky (New York: Paulist, 1981), 242; Edward W. Fasholé-Luke, ‘Ancestor Veneration and the Communion of Saints’, in *New Testament Christianity for Africa and the World: Essays in Honour of Harry Sawyerr*, ed. Mark E. Glasswell and Edward W. Fasholé-Luke, (London: SPCK, 1974), 212; Yusufu Turaki, *Foundations of African Traditional Religion and Worldview* (Nairobi: WordAlive, 2006), Chapter Three (‘Fundamental Theological Beliefs’); Johannes Triebel, ‘Living Together with the Ancestors: Ancestor Veneration in Africa as a Challenge for Missiology’, *Missiology: An International Review* 30, no. 2 (2002): 187–97; Fotland, *Ancestor Christology in Context*, 192; Robert B. Fisher, *West African Religious Traditions: Focus on the Akan of Ghana* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998); Jaco Beyers and Dora N. Mphahele, ‘Jesus Christ as Ancestor: An African Christian Understanding’, *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* 65, no. 1 (2009): 38–44.

community's life together as they are 'invited' and 'welcomed' ceremonially into the community's ongoing life. Veneration of the ancestors is a communal obligation, not 'a system of religion as such'.<sup>22</sup> Bediako agrees with Fortes's observation that where westerners speak of the immortality of the soul and relegate the dead to a distant realm of deity or spirit, Africans do not. Ancestors are not relegated to some metaphysical 'other place', but continue as personalities in the one 'natural realm'.<sup>23</sup> This is important because Bediako understands the primal world of Africa to be one of 'distributed power', containing many spiritual outlets that one can plug in to and receive power for healing, prophecy, controlling witches, and so on. The fact that the ancestors are present and operate in the life of the community is the source of their power. They bridge the divide between *Onyankopon* and the people as they fulfil their several roles.

Charles Aye-Addo disagrees with Pobee and Bediako's use of the *Nana*/ancestor category to refer to Christ because he does not believe the ancestors are powerful enough to represent Christ—only *Onyame* has that kind of power. He writes that 'in traditional thought, it is god—*Onyame* who is referred to as "Grand Ancestor"'.<sup>24</sup> Here we see an instance of Akan theologians operating out of the same single-tiered unitive perspective but disagreeing on the distribution of power within it. Do ancestors have the

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<sup>22</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture*, 12.

<sup>23</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 218.

<sup>24</sup> Aye-Addo, *Akan Christology*, 174. He is quoting from Kofi Asare Opoku, who refers to *Onyame* in this way. See Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion* (Accra: FEP International, 1994), 15. There is some ambiguity in Aye-Addo's description of the ancestors, however. On the one hand he can write, 'for now, it is sufficient to say that in the Akan belief system, the spirits and the living-dead act as intermediaries who convey human sacrifices or prayers to God on behalf of the Akan religious believer' (Aye Addo, *Akan Christology*, 31), while later he writes, 'venerated as they are, ancestors do not have the kind of reality or access to the Supreme Being to be of Christological interest. They also do not have the power to resolve the problems of Akan life because they do not have the role of mediating between the Akan and the Supreme Being' (175). Considering that Aye-Addo is trying to build a case dependent at least in part on the ancestors not functioning as mediators, this ambiguity weakens his argument.

power to function as mediators—and therefore the ability to function as a ‘landing place’ for Christ’s mediatorial role? Or is that kind of power reserved to *Onyame* alone?

### 3.2 Ancestor Qualifications

Two important questions for Pobee and Bediako, who argue that in practice Akan people turn to the ancestors as mediators, are what qualifies a person to be an ‘ancestor’ and whether Jesus meets these qualifications. There is some variation in the traditional African understanding of the ancestors. In some cases, everyone is considered an ancestor regardless of the life they lived. Usually, however, there is a set of criteria that a person must meet to achieve ancestor status. Charles Nyamiti outlines five such criteria:

(a) *natural relationship*, which can be consanguineous or non-consanguineous; (b) *supernatural status*—thanks to which the ancestor possesses: (c) *mediation* and (d) *title to regular sacred communication* with his earthly relatives. It is the supernatural status that is also the basis of his (e) *exemplarity*: the ancestor is a model of behaviour not only because his earthly conduct was good, but because it is also the conduct of an ancestor, i.e. of the one who is both one’s own natural kin or relative, and one who is endowed with super-human condition and power.<sup>25</sup>

Other scholars who use Nyamiti’s work include Jaco Beyers and Dora N. Mphahele, who adopt Nyamiti’s five categories but expand on the fifth by noting that ancestors must meet two conditions to be considered exemplary: first, they must have passed through all the stages of life, including marriage and having children; second, they must have died a natural death not open to shame.<sup>26</sup>

Both Pobee and Bediako describe Jesus as an ancestor but also explain why they do so in spite of Jesus’ failure to fulfil each and every point of qualification. Bediako

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<sup>25</sup> Charles Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor: Christology from an African Perspective* (Gweru: Mambo, 1984), 16.

<sup>26</sup> Beyers and Mphahele, ‘Jesus Christ as Ancestor’, 38–39. These are the technical points that Aye-Addo picks up on and uses to argue that no Akan could consider Jesus a true ancestor.

argues that Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension show him to be the Supreme Ancestor—not because he fulfils the Akan definition, but because he accomplishes what the Akan hoped the ancestors would do for them—serve as a mediator and saviour, high priest and perfect sacrifice.<sup>27</sup> Pobee argues for the appropriateness of the category on the basis of Jesus' humanity and divinity. He will then tie together the Akan practice of referring to their Supreme God as *Nana Nyame* with their designation of Jesus as *Nana Jesus* to take full advantage of the lexical horizons of the word, *Nana*, to construct a royal-priestly Christology.

### 3.3 Ancestors as Mediators

Pobee writes that 'sin, (Akan, *bone*)' is 'a deed or a thought which affects the good relations with the spirit-world'.<sup>28</sup> Whereas in Christianity sin is always ultimately against God, Pobee notes that in Akan traditional religion sin is also against the ancestors. The reason for this has to do with God's utter transcendence and distance from mere mortals, as a result of which the ancestors act '*in loco Deo* and *pro Deo*'.<sup>29</sup> The ancestors, 'the part of the clan gone ahead, are outraged by man's disobedience'.<sup>30</sup> Bediako, for his part, notes that African mythology speaks of an alienation between

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<sup>27</sup> Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu notes that Bediako once preached at an *Odwira* open-air Thanksgiving Service at Akropog-Akuapem, 'at which the whole traditional community was present, including the traditional priests and priestesses' where he taught about the Word of Onyankopon from Hebrews and Jesus as the eternal sacrifice of Jesus as the ultimate hope for the Akan. Asamoah-Gyadu writes: 'In arguing this way, Kwame Bediako pointed to how primal piety and experiences contained elements of high religious value and he frequently referred to the death of Jesus Christ as the ultimate *Odwira*, because in that sacrifice, unlike those of the traditional Ghanaian *Odwira* festival and traditional Jewish festivals, Jesus did not enter the Most Holy Place "by means of the blood of goats and calves" (Heb. 9:12). Rather, he entered the Most Holy Place "once for all by his own blood having obtained eternal redemption." The Epistle to the Hebrews, Kwame Bediako insisted, is an epistle to Africa too.' Asamoah-Gyadu, 'Kwame Bediako and the Eternal Christological Question', 44. For a complete discussion of Jesus and *Odwira* see Frank Kwesi Adams, *Odwira and the Gospel* (Oxford: Regnum, 2010).

<sup>28</sup> Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 117.

<sup>29</sup> 'In the place of God' and 'for God'. Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 117.

<sup>30</sup> Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 118.



God and humanity that is ‘continually in people’s thoughts, yet ... absent from daily living in any practical sense’.<sup>31</sup> As a result, people feel a tenuous connection with the Supreme God through deities and ancestors, who are sometimes—but not always—a blessing. Both Pobee and Bediako, then, see ancestors in position to remedy a problem.

Bediako, like Pobee, accepts that the ancestors are believed by the Akan to function as mediators. He suggests, however, that the mediatorial function of the ancestors—what he calls the ‘cult of the ancestors’—is itself the creation and projection of the ‘social values and spiritual expectations’ of the Akan community ‘into the transcendent realm’.<sup>32</sup> Since Bediako does not believe that ancestors have ever had the power to function as mediators between God and people, he ascribes this belief to the ‘myth-making imagination of the community itself which sacralises’ the ancestors and confers on them ‘the sacred authority that they exercise through those in the community’.<sup>33</sup> For Bediako, Jesus is the ‘true Ancestor and Source of life for all mankind, fulfilling and transcending the benefits believed to be bestowed by lineage ancestors’.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, 25. Ernestina Afriyie recounts several Akan myths which explain *Onyankopon*’s separation from humanity and hence the need for intermediaries. In one, two young men were arguing and one of them shot a bow into the clouds, drawing blood and water. The heavens receded and God went far away. In another, an old woman pounding *fufu* kept hitting *Onyankopon*, so he moved where people could no longer reach him. Afriyie ‘*Abosom* (*Onyame mma* – Children of God) and Jesus Christ (the Son of God)’, 261–68.

<sup>32</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture*, 38.

<sup>33</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, 30. Bediako does not question the ontological reality of the ancestors, only their ability to act as mediators which he ascribed to the ‘myth-making’ power of the community.

<sup>34</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture*, 41–42. In his book, *Akan Christology*, Aye-Addo asks why it is proper for Bediako to speak of the myth-making power of the community only in reference to ancestors and not to the myth-making power of the community from which the New Testament documents and later creeds came – documents Bediako relies on for his own Christological work. Aye-Addo thinks Bediako is being inconsistent in applying ‘the concept of myth vigorously to the ancestor category but refrains from doing so when dealing with the assertions about Christ’ (109). Had Aye-Addo been more attuned to the fact that Bediako’s Christological argument arises out of the material-spiritual universe of the Akan he might have realized that Bediako has used language of the social sciences to explain a faulty theological understanding of the function of ancestors, not their ontological reality which he grounds in the single-tiered interpretive landscape common to both the Bible and Akan religio-culture. In a 1983 article, Bediako writes about ancestors within the material-spiritual universe which he, as an Akan, accepts as

#### 4. AN AKAN CHRISTOLOGY

We move now to a discussion of the Christological conclusions of Kwame Bediako and John Pobee. In this section, I will put the two in conversation with each other and demonstrate how the tacit—and sometimes explicit—use of the single-tiered unitive perspective and the Akan material-spiritual universe inform the discussion. I am focusing on these two Akan theologians because they both use the *Nana*/ancestor category, but do so in some different ways. Later, I will bring others voices into the discussion, particularly Benhardt Quarshie, who returns to Bediako's reading of Hebrews and builds on it, pointing explicitly to the single-tiered unitive perspective. The conversation among these Ghanaian theologians demonstrates how the single-tiered interpretive landscape offers each of them a category with which to formulate a Christology that is both Akan and Christian. Throughout our examination of their conversation, then, I will seek to demonstrate why the conversation itself makes sense and why it has the potential to contribute something unique and constructive to the global Christological conversation.

##### 4.1 Bediako's Christology

In discussing Bediako's Christology, we will first examine how he uses the ancestor category, and in particular the role of ancestors as mediators. Again, however, we should note that Bediako views this category in terms of the Twi word *Nana*. Bediako

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real without making any references to myth. He speaks of the ancestors as real, and indeed subject to demonic impersonation: 'While ancestors are not demons, demons can masquerade as ancestors. Demons can take on identities. Human ignorance and sinfulness can open us to demonic manipulation. Ancestors themselves need to be saved, so how can they have control over us? Once we reach this understanding, demons can take over. For the demons understand that we have now understood, and so we become targets. That is why the Holy Spirit comes to be a protector.' Bediako, 'Biblical Christologies', 164. In this article, Bediako argues quite clearly that the ancestors are not to be seen as a primary source of blessing, though once they were thought to be so. 'Once Christ has come', he writes, 'the ancestors are cut off as the means of blessing for we lay our power lines differently' (166). What changes, he argues, is their role in the community, not their continued existence. Indeed he writes, 'They simply become members of the community. We may even include them in our intercessions' (166). I will return to this point below.

understands that the word ‘ancestor’ outside the lexical context of Twi will be misunderstood on the one hand and under-translated on the other. It is essential to remember, therefore, that *Nana* includes the idea of ancestor but, like the Greek word *Christos*, can be used as a name, a title, and a function, providing an analogical landing place for Jesus as redeemer, saviour, and Lord.

Following an overview of Bediako’s Christological use of the *Nana*/ancestor category, I will briefly discuss the idea of Jesus as *Christus Victor* as an expansion on the idea of Jesus as Lord of all spirits and ancestors. This discussion will demonstrate how the single-tiered unitive perspective on reality undermines the charge of Docetism when *Christus Victor* is used in the African context. As we will see, *Christus Victor* is a highly appropriate designation in the Akan context because it points to Jesus’ victory in the spirit realm—a victory without which the Christian faith would fall flat in a world where such victories are critical.

#### 4.1.1 Jesus as *Nana* Ancestor

When Bediako writes about Christology, he notes a preference among African Christian theologians for using terms derived from African tradition—including ‘Ancestor, Healer, Chief, and Master of Initiation’—to describe Jesus.<sup>35</sup> Some theologians have objected that the use of these African images ‘relegate to the

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<sup>35</sup> Kwame Bediako, ‘The Doctrine of Christ and the Significance of Vernacular Terminology’, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 22, no. 3 (July 1998): 110. While I am dealing here only with Bediako’s use of the ancestor category, Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu has argued that there are three keys to Bediako’s Christology. Looking at Hebrews 1.1–3 in connection with 1 John 1.1 and John 1.14 Asamoah-Gyadu finds evidence for the universality, existential relevance and eschatological import of the Gospel of Jesus Christ – the three themes which he believes characterize Bediako’s work in Christology. ‘This passage [Hebrews 1.1–3] speaks about the universality of Jesus Christ, for he is the one “through whom” the universe was made. There is reference to his existential relevance because Jesus Christ sustains “all things by his powerful word”; and finally the eschatological import since, after providing “purification for our sins, [Jesus] sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.”’ Asamoah-Gyadu, ‘Kwame Bediako and the Eternal Christological Question’, 43.

background biblical terms for Christ'.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, Bediako recognizes that grass-roots Christians in Ghana still prefer and usually use the terms 'Saviour' and 'Messiah' to refer to Jesus.<sup>37</sup> Is there a disconnect between ordinary believers and the scholarly community? Or, as Bediako asks, are there 'other factors [that] need to be considered in order to arrive at a more accurate understanding of the dynamics of the perception of Jesus Christ in the African context?'<sup>38</sup> Bediako believes there are, and points again to language and the way a culture's insights into life are reflected in the language it uses. In doing so, he raises the question of whether there is a basis for analogical continuity present in Akan religio-culture, reflected in the Twi language, that can be used to describe Jesus.

Bediako finds his analogical landing place by exegeting the Akan church's use of the Twi word *Nana* in reference to Jesus. Bediako notes that Ghanaians pray to *Nana Yesu*, but never to 'Chief Jesus' or 'Ancestor Jesus'. He therefore asks whether Akan Christians will be able to use the word *Nana* to describe their experience of the risen Jesus to a broader audience once the global church understands how the Akan people understand and use that word. If a westerner, operating outside the Akan context, insists that *Nana* means 'ancestor' and so cannot be an appropriate word for Christological use, Bediako counters that the problem is not with the word *Nana* but with the word

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<sup>36</sup> Bediako, 'Doctrine of Christ', 110. Bediako may have in mind Adrian Hastings, who wrote that he did not find adequate resources in African culture to fully articulate biblical revelation, particularly in the area of Christology. Hastings seems to have made the 'either/or' mistake rather than seeing, as Bediako argues, an enriching rather than replacement role for Africa's contribution. See Adrian Hastings, *African Theology* (New York: Crossroads, 1976), 50–52.

<sup>37</sup> Bediako is responding at this point specifically to Kenneth Ross's article, 'Current Christological Trends in Northern Malawi', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 27, no. 2 (1997): 160–76. See also Clifton R. Clarke, 'Towards a Functional Christology among AICs in Ghana', *Mission Studies* 22, no.2 (2005): 287–318; Clarke, *African Christology*.

<sup>38</sup> Bediako, 'Doctrine of Christ', 110.

‘ancestor’ as understood in the West.<sup>39</sup> Bediako’s point is simply that an Akan Christian uses the phrase ‘*Nana Jesu*’ in the same way a westerner uses the phrase ‘Christ Jesus’—as both a title and a name. At a deeper level, however, the real issue is that the English rendering of the Akan word deprives it of the resonances *Nana* receives from the single-tiered Akan understanding of reality, which make it the right word to use in prayer to the Jesus revealed in Scripture and experienced in the lives of Akan Christians.<sup>40</sup> The more limited definition of the word ‘ancestor’ in other cultures and languages has no bearing on the robust Akan understanding of *Nana*, in which the one described using this word functions as a mediator between God and humanity.<sup>41</sup>

Within Akan religio-culture, when a man becomes a chief he is ‘enstooled’, that is, he literally sits on the seat of the ancestor chiefs who have gone before him. He is understood in some way to have become a member of that fraternity, and from that point on he is referred to as *Nana* or ‘grandfather’. There is an inextricable link between

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<sup>39</sup> Another example Bediako uses elsewhere involves the Twi word, *abosom*. Translators, thinking the Akan were polytheists, used *abosom*, a word the Akan understood to represent ‘lesser deities’ low on the chain of supernatural powers, to mean ‘gods’. But the Akan didn’t understand the *abosom* that way. So using *abosom* to translate ‘gods’ in the first commandment was jarring to their ear. Properly translated however the Akan insight into spiritual reality helps us understand the text that much better. Cf. Kwame Bediako, ‘Biblical Exegesis in the African Context: The Factor and Impact of the Translated Scriptures. *Journal of African Christian Thought* 6, no. 1 (June 2003): 15–23. For another example of Ghanaian scholars using Twi words and concepts see Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu’s discussion of ‘stools’ in his essay, ‘Kwame Bediako and the Eternal Christological Question’, 42.

<sup>40</sup> He writes, ‘Is “Nana Yesu” less biblical as a way of addressing Jesus simply because *Nana* translates “ancestor” in English? Is it not the question, rather, whether the experience of the reality and actuality of Jesus as intended in Christian affirmation can inhabit the Akan world of “Nana” in the same way that it could inhabit the Greek world of “Logos”? In this specific case, even though *Nana* recalls the category of “ancestor,” and so, in that sense translates the term, in actual fact it is not adequate to leave it at that. For whereas “ancestor” is a generic term in English, “Nana” is both a title and a personal name, in the same way that “Christos” (Christ) was both a title and a personal name in early Christian usage. This means that in point of fact, “Nana” is a more satisfactory term for speaking of the actuality of Christ than “Ancestor.” It should therefore be clear from this that the real theological problem here has to do with the English word “ancestor” and not with *Nana*.’ Kwame Bediako, ‘The Doctrine of Christ and the Significance of Vernacular Terminology’, 110.

<sup>41</sup> Aye-Addo, who argues that ancestors are not sufficiently powerful in Akan culture to act as mediators, and hence a proper category for an Akan Christology, will himself use *Nana*, but in connection with *Nyame*. He will then draw on this same robust understanding of *Nana* among the Akan to argue for a Christology rooted in *Nyame* himself. See Aye-Addo, *Akan Christology*, 174.

his political function and his religious obligation to mediate between the living and the ‘spirit fathers’ for the good of the entire community. Hence ‘the Chief acquires a crucial role as the intermediary between the state and the ancestors. He is the central figure at the organized religious ceremonies which ensure the maintenance of harmony between the living and the spirit-fathers’.<sup>42</sup> The challenge for Akan theologians is

to make clear in the religious world which men and women inhabit and by whose spiritual realities they make sense of their existence, that Jesus Christ, the Supreme *Ancestor* belongs there as Incarnate and Risen Saviour, as Redeemer and Lord, as *Nana*, as Ancestor. The challenge also will be to achieve this clarification without losing Jesus’ uniqueness in that world.<sup>43</sup>

Bediako sees a parallel between what he is doing with the word *Nana* and what the Church Fathers did with the Greek word *logos*. As they entered the Hebrew tradition, in which God created the world *ex nihilo* by means of a ‘word’, *logos* became the word Greco-Roman Christians used to describe Jesus as the Word incarnate, despite the fact that it was not strictly a Hebrew word. Bediako argues that, far from rendering it unusable, the term’s long history of non-theological use in pre-Christian Greek philosophy imbued it with analogical properties that were ripe for exploitation. Likewise, Bediako begins with biblical revelation and finds that the Akan understanding of *Nana*—which has ‘ancestor’ as one of its meanings— allows him to describe Jesus as the ‘True’ or ‘Universal Ancestor’ while remaining faithful to biblical revelation. This is a prime example of Bediako’s assertion that the variety of languages now available to the global church is a gift from God to enable better understanding of biblical revelation.

A second issue arises, however, in the fact that Jesus was a Palestinian Jew. How then can he be considered an ancestor to an Akan? Bediako answers this question by

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<sup>42</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture*, 22–23.

<sup>43</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 85.

appealing to the New Testament book of Hebrews. The author of Hebrews needed to find a way to describe Jesus' accomplishment on the cross as fulfilling the role of the High Priest—making final atonement for sin—even though Jesus was not of the Aaronic tribe. In other words, Aaron was not Jesus' ancestor, so Jesus technically had no ancestral claim to the High Priesthood. The author's solution was to say that Jesus was a priest after the order of Melchizedek—a priest who appears in Genesis 12 and predates Aaron and the Aaronic High Priesthood. By analogy, Bediako argues that Jesus can be the true *Nana*/ancestor because he can trace his human lineage ultimately to Adam and Adam's descendants who now comprise the peoples of every tongue, tribe, and nation. By this reasoning, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, Isaiah, Peter, and Paul are all legitimate 'ancestors' of the Akan people.<sup>44</sup> In short, if Jesus could be Israel's high priest, lacking the Jewish requirements for that office, then by analogy Jesus can be the true ancestor of the Akan without fulfilling all the requirements traditionally understood to be necessary for that role<sup>45</sup> The Epistle to the Hebrews frees Jesus from both Jewish tribal particularity and, by analogy, African tribal particularity.

The priesthood, mediation and hence the salvation that Jesus Christ brings to *all* people every-where belong to an entirely different category from what people may claim for their clan, family, tribal and national priests and mediators. It is the *quality* of the achievement and ministry of Jesus Christ

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<sup>44</sup> Roar G. Fotland notes, however, that Bediako has re-interpreted African traditional religion's understanding of ancestors 'from the perspective of Christian theology' yet without 'twisting ATR into something it is not.' As Fotland points out Bediako does this without ever abandoning his Akan understanding of reality. Instead he has allowed the coming together of biblical revelation and the Akan material-spiritual universe, both of which see the world in the same way, to make use of the ancestor category in formulating his Christology. Fotland, *Ancestor Christology in Context*, 455. Fotland is here arguing against scholars like James Cox (and others in the 'World Religions' school) as well as African scholars like Okot p'Bitek and Ali Mazrui who object in principle to there being any continuity between ATRs and Christianity.

<sup>45</sup> For an insightful discussion of Bediako's use of Hebrews, see Benhardt Y. Quarshie, "'Jesus, Pioneer and Perfector of Faith' (Heb. 12:2): Kwame Bediako's Hebrews-based Ancestor Christology Revisited," in Bediako, Quarshie, and Asamoah-Gyadu, 21–37. We will return to Quarshie below.

for and on behalf of *all* people, together with who he is, that reveal his absolute supremacy.<sup>46</sup>

Running parallel to his argument from Hebrews that the Akan have a ‘natural’ right to claim Jesus as their ancestor, Bediako points to Jesus’ incarnation to assert the Akan’s ‘adoptive’ right to claim Jesus as their ancestor. Bediako writes,

we have not merely our natural past, for through our faith in Jesus, we have also an ‘adoptive’ past, the past of God, reading into biblical history itself. ... Once this basic, universal relevance of Jesus Christ is granted, it is no longer a question of trying to accommodate the Gospel in our culture; we learn to read and accept the Good News as *our* story. Our Lord has been, from the beginning, the Word of God for us as for all people everywhere.<sup>47</sup>

Apart from the permeability of the single-tiered Akan world, this sense of robust, living interaction between the biblical ancestors and today’s Christians would simply fade into a kind of distant mythical afterthought—as it has, for the most part, in the two-tiered West. Bediako understands that our basic humanity and what it means to be made in the image of God is no longer subject to ‘racial, cultural, national or lineage categories’ but to our identity ‘in Jesus Christ himself’. Hence, ‘the true children of Abraham are those who put their faith in Jesus Christ in the same way that Abraham trusted God (Romans 4.11-12)’.<sup>48</sup> Once Jesus’ incarnation has established this link to Abraham and through him to the God who called Abraham, Bediako argues that the Akan are able to discover truth about the God of Abraham from what they have already learned about *Onyame* as ‘Creator and Sustainer’. In this way, Bediako builds an important bridge between Akan primal religion and the biblical witness prior to bringing the ancestors into the picture. Bediako helps to transform the once-distant *Onyame*, whom the Akan already know as ‘Creator and Sustainer ... deeply rooted in

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<sup>46</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture*, 34.

<sup>47</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture*, 14–15.

<sup>48</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture*, 14–15.



our heritage'<sup>49</sup> into the Supreme Creator God revealed to us in Jesus Christ. In this way, Bediako takes the Akan story back to Adam, claiming Adam's story as 'our story'. Akan Christians are thus freed from the confines of a single clan to the universal world of God's creation. This is significant because African mythology tells of an alienation between God and humanity.<sup>50</sup> The incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ resolves the question of how people can be reconciled with their Creator, a question that went unanswered by the uncertain and tenuous sense connection with God people had of through the *abosom* and ancestors. For these reasons, Bediako finds in *Nana*/ancestor a category for African theologians to use to describe Jesus 'when we begin to reflect on the Good News *from the standpoint of the world-view of our heritage*'.<sup>51</sup>

Bediako probes the Akan response to God's revelation found in Akan primal religio-culture and finds in Jesus the fulfilment of all they had hoped for from their ancestors, whether fathers or elder brothers.<sup>52</sup> In this sense, the ancestors provide an analogical landing place to describe what Scripture tells us Jesus did—became the final mediator between humanity and God. We see this more clearly when Bediako uses the idea of Jesus as our 'elder brother' to describe Jesus as one 'who has participated with us in our African experience in every respect, except in our sin and alienation from God'.<sup>53</sup> Bediako uses this term to emphasize the point that Jesus is able to mediate for

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<sup>49</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture*, 15–16.

<sup>50</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture*, 25. Chapter Two of this book is an edited version of *Jesus in African Culture*.

<sup>51</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture*, 20; italics added. In Chapter Four of *Jesus in Africa* ('Understanding African Theology in the Twentieth Century', 49–60), Bediako discusses this term 'world-view' in the context of John Taylor's understanding of religion as 'traditions of response'. Bediako understands world-views as a people's response to God's revelation of himself to them prior to the coming of Scripture that, in a sense, completes the story begun in their primal traditions.

<sup>52</sup> John Taylor referred to a people's 'tradition of response'. See Chapter Nine in John V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God*, (London: SCM Press, 1972). This is a concept Bediako liked and used—see Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*; 'Biblical Exegesis in the African Context', 20; *Theology and Identity*, 436.

<sup>53</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture*, 18; 'Biblical Christologies', 148.

us before the Father where the ‘ancestor spirits’ cannot.<sup>54</sup> In making this point, Bediako again understands who ancestors are and what they do through the lens of Akan religio-culture. The close kinship ties of Akan religio-culture allow Jesus to be an Akan’s ‘true Elder Brother now in the presence of God, his Father and our Father’, displacing ‘the mediatorial function of our natural “spirit-fathers.”’<sup>55</sup>

Of course, it is not just Jesus’ superiority which allows him to displace the ancestors—it is also the fact that, being sinners themselves, the ancestors need saving. In addition, Jesus’ reign as Lord in the spirit world demonstrates his sole claim to be mediator for all. In the biblical narrative of redemption history, Jesus’ resurrection and ascension to the dwelling place of the ‘gods’ and ‘ancestor spirits’—not as one among equals but as Lord—demonstrates his right to be called Lord of all. As Bediako puts it, Jesus ‘sums up in himself all their powers and cancels any terrorizing influence they might be assumed to have upon us’.<sup>56</sup> In summary, Bediako writes,

Jesus is our Brother, the Great Ancestor, the only one who has been raised from the dead and who has come back to tell us of the realm of spirit. If having come to the knowledge of Jesus, we still insist on inquiring of ancestors other than Jesus, following former ways of communication with the realm of transcendence, then we may be in danger of drifting away from the gospel. Jesus is the only safe way given to us, by which we may communicate with the transcendent world, and he has given us his Holy Spirit to lead us into a full appreciation and experience of the truth.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Bediako does not reference Nyamiti as this point, though Nyamiti had already developed this idea in his 1984 book, *Christ as Our Ancestor*. The term ‘elder brother’ recalls as well Jesus’ parable of the Prodigal Son where the elder brother does not intercede for his wayward brother and so fails to play his proper role as protector/saviour.

<sup>55</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture*, 18. Bediako points out that the first converts to Christianity often prayed for their ancestors who had died before the proclamation of the gospel in Africa, thus indicating that they understood that Jesus was the sole Lord and Saviour.

<sup>56</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture*, 19.

<sup>57</sup> Kwame Bediako, ‘Christian Faith and African Culture: An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews’, *Journal of African Christian Thought* 13, no. 1 (June 2010): 50.

Jesus becomes the ‘true Ancestor and Source of life for all mankind, fulfilling and transcending the benefits believed to be bestowed by lineage ancestors’,<sup>58</sup> so that we are raised out of mere tribal or clan loyalties into a community that embraces peoples from every tongue, tribe, and nation.

#### 4.1.2 Jesus as *Christus Victor*

The idea of Jesus as Lord over all spirit powers deserves further attention. Bediako is aware of the attraction of Jesus as *Christus Victor*,<sup>59</sup> and draws upon Mbiti’s discussion of this approach to Jesus within the African Initiated Churches and their desire for power to heal and provide protection against demonic forces. Pointing to the single-tiered unitive perspective on reality and the Akan interpretive landscape, which makes room for malevolent spiritual forces, Bediako writes,

this understanding of Christ arises from Africans’ keen awareness of forces and powers at work in the world which threaten the interests of life and harmony. Jesus is victorious over the spiritual realm and particularly over evil forces and so answers to the need for a powerful protector against these forces and powers.<sup>60</sup>

This understanding of Jesus informs what Africans mean when they speak of Jesus as ‘Our Saviour’. Considering Jesus’ lordship over the spiritual realm from the vantage point of the African single-tiered unitive perspective on reality reveals Jesus’ authority over any and all spiritual forces, so that they are no longer feared as once they were. Jesus, second person of the Triune God, is now the *Christus Victor* combating the powers of darkness on a daily basis—not only in the age to come, but in the here and

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<sup>58</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture*, 41–42.

<sup>59</sup> The term itself comes from the title of Gustaf Aulén’s classic book, *Christus Victor*, which was first published in 1931. Aulén uses the term to describe a particular understanding of the atonement, reaching all the way back to the Church Fathers, in which ‘the work of Christ is first and foremost a victory over the powers which hold mankind in bondage: sin, death, and the devil’. Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. A. G. Herber (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 20.

<sup>60</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture*, 8.

now. While the *Christus Victor* emphasis can risk pushing Jesus' humanity and his atoning work on the Cross to the background, this danger is minimal in the context of the Akan interpretive landscape because the single-tiered perspective argues that any separation of the material and spiritual is ultimately false. Within what Bediako himself has called the 'sacramental universe' of the Akan, the material/spiritual aspects of both sin and spirit activity argue against a merely Docetic Christological reading of the data. Jesus as *Christus Victor* is able to both thwart the machinations of the evil one and heal disease. For the Akan, as Bediako notes, 'Jesus, as our Saviour, brings near and makes universal the almightiness of God. This means that he "is able to do all things, to save in all situations, to protect against all enemies, and is available whenever those who believe may call upon him."' <sup>61</sup> When he writes 'all enemies', Bediako means all.

#### **4.1.3 Benhardt Quarshie's Return to Hebrews to Build on Bediako's Work**

Benhardt Quarshie, a scholar and long-time friend and colleague of Kwame Bediako, builds on Bediako's ancestor Christology by arguing that the deepest desire of most Akan people is to become 'ancestors' themselves. <sup>62</sup> He begins with John Taylor's famous question, 'if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions that Africans are asking, what would he look like?' <sup>63</sup> I raise Quarshie's contribution here to draw attention once again to the importance of the single-tiered unitive perspective on reality for understanding the world in which the Akan live. Quarshie argues that to answer John Taylor's question requires taking seriously the single-tiered perspective, which he calls the 'African integrated view of life as inclusive of the spiritual and the physical'.

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<sup>61</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture*, 9. Bediako is in conversation with John Mbiti at this point and has quoted him in this passage.

<sup>62</sup> Quarshie, 'Jesus, Pioneer and Perfecter of Faith', 21–37.

<sup>63</sup> John V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence amid African Religion*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM, 2001), 16; quoted in Quarshie, 'Jesus, Pioneer and Perfecter of Faith', 25; also quoted in Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture*, 5; Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*, 20.

He also suggests that Bediako himself was not fully alert to this enlarged reality. He writes,

It must be acknowledged that the area of concern that Bediako circumscribes—‘spiritual universe and ... religious needs and longings’—is rather narrow and must be enlarged to include the totality of life and not merely its spiritual or religious dimension. Indeed, the quotation from Taylor has broader implications, especially because of the African integrated view of life as inclusive of the spiritual and the physical. In effect, Christ must be presented to Africans in such a way that he answers all the questions that Africans are asking, meets all the needs that Africans have and that Christ feels at home within the worldview (an integrated one of the spiritual and the physical) with which Africans operate. What then are the African’s deepest yearnings?<sup>64</sup>

Quarshie is certainly correct in thinking that the ‘African integrated view of life as inclusive of the spiritual and the physical’ is critical for answering Taylor’s question. I believe Quarshie is also right to note that Bediako was not always explicit in acknowledging the importance of the single-tiered unitive perspective, though he consistently wrote his Christology at least tacitly from that understanding of the Akan world.<sup>65</sup>

Quarshie continues that any focus on the here and now by the Akan also necessarily implies a concern for what comes after.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, he argues that the things most feared by the Akan on earth—childlessness, premature death, and inappropriate funerals—are precisely those matters that would keep someone from achieving ancestor status. Quarshie continues with a discussion of Hebrews 11 in order to make the point that all those listed as ‘ancestors of the faith’ were there because of their faith. ‘By faith’ is the key to ancestor status. However, for the Old Testament Israelites, as for the

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<sup>64</sup> Quarshie, ‘Jesus, Pioneer and Perfecter of Faith’, 25.

<sup>65</sup> C.f. Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, Chapter Twelve (‘Christian Religion and the African World-view: Will Ancestors Survive?’). In this chapter Bediako explicitly draws on the single-tiered ontology though in other places he does not.

<sup>66</sup> This would, of course, be one counter-argument to the threat of Docetism.

Akan, faith in God (whether known as *Yahweh* or *Onyankopon*) was not enough. Their faith was necessarily incomplete because they lived prior to Christ's incarnation.

As Quarshie further develops Bediako's work on Hebrews, he shows how Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, functions as both 'super-ancestor' and the 'ancestor-maker'. Functionally, as Bediako himself argued, Jesus accomplishes for the Akan people what they had hoped the ancestors would achieve. Quarshie adds to this by pointing out Jesus' role as the 'ancestor-maker'.

It is because Jesus is more than an ancestor that we have designated him as Super-Ancestor and his role as Super-Ancestor is above all seen in his making people ancestors. He is Ancestor-Maker because, in the words of Hebrews, he is the pioneer and perfecter of faith. We can then conclude that 'if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions that Africans are asking', he would look like an ancestor but he would be an Ancestor-Maker. He has brought all Christians, including Kwame Bediako, into the presence of *Onyankopon*, *Nyonmo*, as the pioneer and perfecter of their faith.<sup>67</sup>

## 4.2 The Christology of John Pobee

I turn now to John Pobee, who begins his Christological thinking with the question, 'Why should an Akan relate to Jesus of Nazareth, who does not belong to his clan, family, tribe, and nation?'<sup>68</sup> We have seen already how Kwame Bediako answers this question, but Pobee approaches his answer differently. He begins with a detailed examination of how an Akan would accept both the humanity and divinity of Jesus according to Akan criteria.<sup>69</sup> He then discusses Christology in the context of the Twi

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<sup>67</sup> Quarshie, 'Jesus, Pioneer and Perfecter of Faith', 37.

<sup>68</sup> Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 81. It is in Chapter Five of this book, titled 'Toward Christology in an African Theology', that Pobee writes most extensively on Christology. Pobee did write further on Christology, but never with the same sustained attention to Christ as the 'Great Ancestor' found here.

<sup>69</sup> Pobee is clearly in conversation with one of his own colleagues, Joshua Kudadjie, in his chapter on Christology in *Toward an African Theology*, but Pobee, simply references this conversation without providing a written account. We are therefore dependent on Pobee himself for Kudadjie's critique, found in Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 90, 166 f.n. 12. Apparently, Kudadjie objected to Pobee's work on the grounds that Pobee is still dependent on Greco-Roman thought forms when he frames his discussion within the 'divine-human' nature of Jesus. Kudadjie wants to know why Pobee doesn't simply begin as though he is the first person to encounter and read the biblical revelation about Jesus. It seems to [Kudadjie] that the approach should be: 'What does the Akan understand the person of Jesus to be? He

word *Nana*, which can refer to the Supreme Being himself, to the ancestors, to chiefs, to the chief's linguist or spokesman, or, when used by Christians, to Jesus. Pobee is careful to note that he is proposing just one possible Christology and that he expects others to be developed as African Christian theologians continue their work in this field.

#### **4.2.1 Pobee Establishes the Humanity and Divinity of Jesus as an Akan Understands These Terms**

Pobee's Christological thinking begins with something of a paradox. First, he argues that the metaphysical language of the creeds represented the cultural context of the early Greco-Roman church but does not represent Akan religio-culture. Pobee argues that a more suitable theological methodology for his own Akan setting involves using 'functional' language—that is, 'expressing impressions of Jesus in terms of his activity'.<sup>70</sup> These 'impressions' will 'spring out of a people's experiences and culture'.<sup>71</sup> In later articles Pobee reveals his appreciation for a biblical hermeneutic rooted in experience and culture.<sup>72</sup> Second, however, he declares that any Christology that wants

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need not accept the conclusion of the Greco-Hellenistic-European theologians that Jesus is human-divine, and then see whether the Akan also sees Jesus thus.' Kudadjie is 'advocating for a radically different approach—as if the Akan were the first to work out a Christology. How would he do it, from his knowledge of Jesus in the Gospels?' Pobee suggests three reasons why this is not possible. First, Jesus being human-divine is a non-negotiable of the church and he does not dare risk heresy on this question. Second, to act as though they are the first to see Jesus is impossible; the better question, as Pobee sees it, is how to assess the facts of the life of Jesus, whom they did not see. Third, Pobee argues that he is persuaded that the Akan world-view is similar enough to the biblical world-view for him to proceed: 'we ourselves are persuaded of the similarities between Akan man's world view and the Semitic and biblical world view. At least the evidence adduced in this section is an argument in favor of that view, not to mention the works of Kwesi A. Dickson, J. B. Danquah, Modupe Oduyoye, even if we take some of the linguistic arguments *cum grano salis*. In view of these arguments we feel it more fruitful to proceed by the similarities between Akan and Jewish views of humanity. That is to go from the known to the unknown' (166).

<sup>70</sup> Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 82.

<sup>71</sup> Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 83.

<sup>72</sup> He notes four hermeneutical approaches present in Africa today and argues that the insights from each must be combined to arrive at an understanding of the biblical text. These four approaches are: (1) Culture as Hermeneutic, or Inculturation Hermeneutic (Mbiti, Pobee); (2) Social Political Reality as Hermeneutic, or Liberation Hermeneutic (I. J. Mosala); (3) Passion-Resurrection (O. N. Onwu); and (4) Pluralism as Hermeneutic (Foucault). Though Pobee places himself in the first category his emphasis on experience certainly implies an openness to the second, 'liberationist' hermeneutical approach.

to claim biblical warrant must include the full humanity and divinity of Jesus—which involves a metaphysical claim. Accordingly, he begins with the Nicene Creed’s assertion of Jesus’ full humanity and full divinity, dealing first with Jesus’ humanity.

#### 4.2.2 Jesus’ Humanity According to Akan Expectations

After examining the Akan understanding of what it means to be human, Pobee concludes that the Akan picture of humanity and the biblical picture of humanity—particularly Jesus’ humanity—are virtually identical. The fact that Jesus was born is not enough to demonstrate his true humanity, as both Semitic and African worldviews allowed for the possibility of deities taking on human form. Instead, he focuses on Jesus’ being spirit (Hebrew=*nephesh*; Greek=*psuche*), without which he would be dead. (It was his spirit that he gave up on the cross.) As a man, he was body (*soma*) and had the personality of a true man. Jesus also had *sarx*, or flesh.<sup>73</sup> Though not inherently sinful, the flesh is the entry point for sin—thus Jesus was ‘potentially capable of sinning’, yet never did.<sup>74</sup> Continuing down the list of Akan criteria for humanity, Pobee points out that Jesus was part of a blood kinship group with a mother, brothers, and sisters. He was circumcised to mark him as part of that group, and by his baptism he identified himself with humankind. Pobee writes that baptism ‘was a rite of solidarity which went to the making of this man Jesus in the African sense. He was declared a man because by the rite he was declared a member of a group. *Cognatus ergo est*.’<sup>75</sup> Jesus’ human finitude was evidenced by both his death and his fear of death in the

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<sup>73</sup> Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 84.

<sup>74</sup> Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 84, 86, 91.

<sup>75</sup> Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 89. As Pobee uses it, *cognatus ergo est* means roughly ‘he is known relationally, therefore he is’.



Garden of Gethsemane. This, in the mind of the Akan, renders Jesus a fully human person.

Death is the ultimate end and part of being human. And so Jesus died and thereby showed his finitude and humanity. In this connection, Matthew 27:50—‘Jesus ... yielded up his spirit’—is very much the sort of language an Akan would use. As we said earlier, under the Akan anthropology the *kra* returns to God at death. Jesus’ *kra* was given up to God, and therefore he died, as is expected of a man.<sup>76</sup>

As further evidence of his humanity, Pobee looks at Jesus’ limitations. Jesus was limited in his knowledge (having given up his omniscience at his incarnation), and his mortality points to his human finitude. Moral finitude is also a mark of being human among the Akan, and here Pobee has to deal with the claim that Jesus, though a man, was sinless. Pobee’s colleague, Joshua Kudadjie, argued that ‘in the Akan view of humanity, one important aspect is the unreliability, wickedness, evil, failure, and such characteristics, of man’<sup>77</sup>—if this is the case then Jesus would lack one important aspect of Akan humanity. Pobee seeks to deal with Kudadjie’s objection by arguing that humanity has the ‘tendency’ towards these behaviours.<sup>78</sup> In a final example of his limitation, Jesus acknowledged that whatever power he possessed was derived from and dependent upon God. Pobee points to prayer as a sign of this dependence: ‘It would be nonsense for God to pray to God!’<sup>79</sup> He does, however, make one caveat: ‘whereas in Akan society mortal man is dependent on God as well as on the ancestors, Jesus was dependent on God alone, showing a uniqueness not found in Akan traditional

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<sup>76</sup> Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 89–90.

<sup>77</sup> Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 90.

<sup>78</sup> Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 90–91. Mere ‘tendency’ would fall far short of an orthodox view of what happened at the Fall, opening Pobee to the suspicion of Pelagianism. Additionally Kudadjie appears to consider these traits as ‘characteristic’ of humankind and not mere tendencies.

<sup>79</sup> Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 84.

thinking'.<sup>80</sup> That being said, Jesus' human dependency on God is revealed in the way he addresses God as *Abba*.

Jesus alone was able to call God 'Abba,' Father, to whose will he was devoted. Unlike him, all other men have become less than human by following sin, which marred the *imago Dei*, as outlined above. But Jesus by his sinlessness is more truly human than the rest of us.<sup>81</sup>

In summary, Pobee writes:

The humanity of Jesus is one aspect of New Testament Christology which the attempt to construct a Christology in an African theology cannot skirt. The evidences for Jesus' humanity settle down to his anthropological make-up being soul, flesh, and body; his finitude in terms of his knowledge and power; and his deep consciousness of total dependence on God. As outlined above, we believe Akan man can easily absorb the ideas of his humanity.<sup>82</sup>

#### 4.2.3 Jesus' Divinity According to Akan Expectations

Pobee, because he sees no metaphysical language in the New Testament itself, argues for Jesus' divinity entirely on the basis of the New Testament's description of his activities—that is, in functional terms.<sup>83</sup>

The divinity of Jesus was primarily expressed not through the term God, but rather through a description of his activities in a manner reminiscent of the activities of God the Father. Nowhere do we find the idea that the Word is Second God in any Hellenistic sense. Despite John 1.1, there is not personal identification of the Word with the Father. Jesus' divinity is described in functional terms.<sup>84</sup>

Pobee identifies three marks of divinity in Jesus' actions. The first is Jesus' sinlessness, the result of his complete obedience to God in resisting all temptation. Pobee supports this claim by pointing to Jesus' words, 'No one is good but God alone'

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<sup>80</sup> Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 91.

<sup>81</sup> Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 91.

<sup>82</sup> Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 84.

<sup>83</sup> In *African Christology*, Clarke follows this idea of functionality but does so quite differently from Pobee. Clarke is examining Christology among the AICs of Ghana. He finds people in the churches preferring biblical language for Jesus (Saviour, Messiah, Lord, healer, God) that point to what Jesus does. His book makes a strong case for taking seriously the 'orality' of the AICs where their theology is worked out in the preaching, prayers, singing, and testimonies of the people.

<sup>84</sup> Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 85.

(Mark 10:18 RSV). Pobee continues, ‘the sinlessness of Jesus ... does not turn on the absence of human frailty but in a constantly renewed victory over temptations’. Jesus’ total devotion to the will of God kept the *imago Dei* fully intact. Pobee argues that when God created people ‘in the image and likeness of God’, they were as God. What marred the *imago Dei* was sin, specifically human egocentricity and disobedience. Unlike the rest of humanity, however, Jesus shunned sin and consequently continued to be as God. He is the authentic man bearing the *imago Dei*. It was as a man that he achieved sinlessness and thus came to be seen as divine.<sup>85</sup>

Pobee emphasizes two aspects to Jesus’ sinlessness. First, Jesus lived a life that endeavoured never to destroy the dignity of others. Second, Jesus’ life was one of perfect love of all people, which Pobee calls sinlessness from the ‘divine angle’. In drawing his conclusion, Pobee appeals directly to the single-tiered perspective of the Akan to highlight Jesus’ claim to divinity in his person: ‘That pattern of life [loving as Jesus did] in Akan society is what pleases the spirit-world and is the characteristic of the Supreme Being as well as the ancestors, on whose goodwill the well-being of the living depends.’<sup>86</sup>

Second, Pobee discusses Jesus’ manifestations of authority and power as marks of divinity. He points specifically to Jesus’ miracles, through which ‘the reign of God was manifested in the world’.<sup>87</sup> Pobee draws on the essential permeability of the single-

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<sup>85</sup> Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 86.

<sup>86</sup> Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 92. I noted earlier that Pobee’s interpretation of the Akan understanding of humankind’s unreliability, wickedness, evil, and failures as indicative of a ‘tendency’ opened him up to the charge of Pelagianism; his insistence that Jesus’ sinlessness, and hence divinity, resulted completely from his obedience likewise opens him up to the charge of Adoptionism—the belief that Jesus’ obedience earned him divine status. This raises the question: if this was possible for Jesus, then why not for everyone? More importantly, if obedience is sufficient, why was Christ’s atoning sacrifice on the cross necessary? This is the problem inherent in a ‘functional’ approach. On the other hand, Pobee’s discussion of Jesus as creator certainly implies an ontologically based divinity.

<sup>87</sup> Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 86.

tiered world of the Akan when he says that healing and cures are attributed to the Supreme Being. Consequently, human healers do two things. First, they look up to the skies to indicate dependence upon the Supreme Being; second, they specifically address the Supreme Being and ask that he would heal.

Thus the good miracles performed by Jesus would be a concrete way of expressing his power and divinity. *Jesus wo Nyame ne tum*—Jesus has the power of God and wields it. He could not have wielded that power unless he had been ‘ensouled’ with God.<sup>88</sup>

Pobee is careful to distinguish Jesus from other healers by explaining that in the Akan understanding, healers are able to attain a temporary state of sinlessness, called ‘ensoulment’, before becoming the vehicle of the Supreme Being’s healing power. Jesus, on the other hand, was in a permanent state of sinlessness and ‘ensoulment’ by virtue of his perfect obedience to God.

The difference between Jesus and the healers would be the unprecedented scale on which he was ensouled with God: Jesus was in a perpetual state of holiness, perpetually ensouled with God so much so that the divine power was like a continuously flowing electric power in him, unlike the traditional healer, who has the occasional experience of it.<sup>89</sup>

Jesus’ power and authority are further emphasized by the New Testament teaching that Jesus is the creator of all things in Jn 1.3, Rom 11.36, Col 1.16, and 1 Cor 8.6, and that as creator he is also judge.

Jesus is Creator in two senses: first, he is the efficient cause of creation; and second, he is an example and model for the rest of mankind. Creation is an act of revelation, hence the claim that God is knowable through creation (Romans 1.19-20). ... By virtue of being the agent of creation, Jesus has claims on all men (John 17.2). That is precisely why Jesus is the judge of the world. His judgment pertains to salvation and condemnation (John 3.17, 19, 12.48).<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 92.

<sup>89</sup> Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 93. Pobee does not suggest this, but his Akan ‘perpetual ensoulment’ offers an analogical landing place for understanding what it means that Jesus is the ‘eternally begotten’ Son of the Father.

<sup>90</sup> Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 87.

Pobee expands on Jesus' identity as creator by using an Akan expression, *Jesu ne kra yeh dur*, which means 'Jesus has a heavy *kra*. The *kra*, or soul, is what links Jesus to the Supreme Being'. Quoting Williamson he continues, the *kra* is 'the mark of the Creator, the vitalizing power of the Creator ... within him'.<sup>91</sup> In this way Pobee again ties his Christology directly into the Akan single-tiered interpretive landscape.

Thirdly, Pobee points to Jesus' eternity, which is presupposed on the basis that he is the Creator. He summarizes his discussion of Jesus's divinity as follows: 'We therefore discern the following elements in the divinity of Jesus—his sinlessness, his authority and power, not only as the agent of creation but also as judge at the end. And with these go his pre-existence and eternity.'<sup>92</sup>

#### **4.2.4 Pobee's Understanding of Sin and Evil [inserted after 4.2.3]**

Before discussing Pobee's understanding of Jesus as *Nana*, it is important to recognize how Pobee defines sin, particularly as the Akan live out their lives in community. Here the 'I am because we are,' informs his understanding of sin and how Jesus as *Nana* meets the deepest yearnings of the Akan heart and mind.<sup>93</sup>

Pobee defines sin, then, as any 'deed or a thought which affects the good relations with the spirit-world. One difference at this stage is that whereas in Christianity it is only God who is affected, in traditional society there are also the gods and ancestors.' Further, because 'sin ... is any act which does not contribute to the welfare and continuance of the family and detracts from the *sensus communis*' sin can be seen as any 'word or deed which putrefies fellowship in one family. Our new

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<sup>91</sup> Sidney G. Williamson, edited by Kwesi A. Dickson, *Akan Religion and the Christian Faith*, 92 quoted by Pobee in *Toward an African Theology*, 93.

<sup>92</sup> Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 87.

<sup>93</sup> Pobee himself rephrased this as 'Akan man's theory of existence is *cognatus ergo sum* – I am related by blood, therefore I exist.' Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 111.

emphasis would be to go beyond the extended family to all human beings as children of God's family.'<sup>94</sup> Pobee believes that in the Akan understanding of *adoye*, the ethic of love, he finds a reflection of biblical faith that 'goes beyond the denunciation of man as a sinner to offer him the hope of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. ... That which does not conform to the standard of *adoye* is sin because it sunders the cohesion of the society by destroying the personality of both victim and perpetrator and in the process challenges the honor, integrity, and dignity of the great King, God.'<sup>95</sup>

When Pobee turns his attention to evil, he notes that 'the primary cause of evil in traditional society is the spirit-beings, notably the witches; and the secondary cause is the man who has done something wrong.' Once again, however, the communal aspect of this understanding of evil is significant because witchcraft highlights the tension between 'traditional collectivism and an individualism which is by and large foreign to traditional society.'<sup>96</sup> Pobee's understanding of sin and evil within the communal matrix of an Akan cosmos that necessarily includes the ancestors, deities, and spirits – which can be manipulated through witchcraft – means that Jesus' atoning work on the one hand and his ability to help people experience *adoye* on the other fits the traditional religio-cultural world of the Akan. Space does not allow me to say more at this point, but it is an area worthy of additional study and analysis.

#### **4.2.5 Jesus as *Nana*: Great and Greatest Ancestor, Chief, Supreme Being, Linguist**

Having laid out in detail how an Akan could accept Jesus' humanity and divinity, which he regards as the two essential elements of any authentic Christology, Pobee returns to

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<sup>94</sup> Pobee, *Towards an African Theology*, 118.

<sup>95</sup> Pobee, *Towards an African Theology*, 119.

<sup>96</sup> Pobee, *Towards an African Theology*, 100.

the question of Jesus as an ancestor—indeed, the Great and Greatest Ancestor—for an Akan. He finds his point of contact in the word *Nana*. While drawing on its ‘ancestor’ meaning, Pobee goes beyond the Twi word’s normal application and describes Jesus as the ancestor whose power is felt in both the natural and supernatural realms. It is precisely the permeability of the interpretive landscape that emerges from the single-tiered unitive perspective on the world of the Akan that gives meaning and power to Pobee’s argument. He writes,

Our approach would be to look on Jesus as the Great and Greatest Ancestor—in Akan language *Nana*.<sup>97</sup> With that will go the power and authority to judge the deeds of men, rewarding the good, punishing the evil. Again, in our context we shall seek to emphasize that even if Jesus is *Nana* like the other illustrious ancestors, he is a nonpareil of a judge; he is superior to the other ancestors by virtue of being closest to God and as God. As *Nana* he has authority over not only the world of men but also of all spirit beings, namely the cosmic powers and the ancestors.<sup>98</sup>

By applying this word *Nana* to Jesus Pobee brings other entities that can also be referred to by this word into his Christological discussion.<sup>99</sup> He starts with the role of the Chief who is *Nana*. Drawing on the work of K. A. Busia, Pobee argues that the single office of chief contained the roles of judge, commander-in-chief, legislator, and executive and administrative head of the community. Quoting Busia, he makes the point that the chief’s role was never just political: consonant with the single-tiered perspective, the one who rules on earth must derive his authority from the world of the

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<sup>97</sup> Pobee has a footnote at this point, in which he says, ‘In Akan society *Nana* is used of the illustrious ancestor as well as of the Supreme Being, called *Nana Nyame*. That may indicate that the ancestors live in the court of God and exercise some authority under God’, 167.

<sup>98</sup> Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 94.

<sup>99</sup> Bediako has already made the point that Akan Christians virtually never pray to ‘ancestor’ Jesus, but will regularly pray to *Nana Jesus*. Clifton Clarke’s research among the AICs of Ghana caused him to call into question the use of *Nana*, at least among AICs (Clarke, *African Christology*, 92). Clarke is nuanced in his understanding that *Nana*, when applied to Jesus, has a more profound meaning than when it is used in reference to ancestors generally. Like Bediako he argues for the ‘ideas and images behind the concepts’ thereby finding a point of contact between the Jesus revealed in Scripture and the Akan world view. Clarke, ‘Towards a Functional Christology’, 299–303.

spirit. Akan religio-culture understands the natural and supernatural within the interpretive landscape of a permeable unitive world. Since the natural is understood to reflect the spiritual, Busia points out that ‘the most important aspect of Ashanti chieftaincy was undoubtedly the religious one’.

An Ashanti chief filled a sacral role. His stool, the symbol of his office, was a sacred emblem. It represented the community, their solidarity, their permanence, their continuity. The chief was the link between the living and the dead. And his highest role was when he officiated in the public religious rites which gave expression to the community values. He then acted as the representative of the community whose members are believed to include those who are alive, and those who are either dead or are still unborn. The sacral aspect of the chief’s role was a powerful sanction of his authority.<sup>100</sup>

Having already noted that the Supreme Being is referred to as *Nana Nyame*, Pobee continues by pointing out that in traditional Akan religion the Supreme Being is considered to be the paramount chief who must be approached through sub-chiefs.

Pobee uses this idea to construct a picture of *Nana Jesus* as a kind of sub-chief to *Nana Nyame*. Pobee, following the Akan paradigm, pictures Jesus as subordinate to the Father in function but not in being as the following description of his understanding of the biblical picture demonstrates.

There appears to be some similarity between the Akan religion and the biblical faith with regard to the kingship of God. In the Bible, God is king. As Psalm 10:16 puts it, “The Lord is king for ever and ever” (cf. Ps. 44:4-47.7). Similarly in the New Testament, God is described as king—Matthew 5:35; I Timothy 1:17; 6:15. On the other hand, Jesus is also described as king, as, for example, the parable of the sheep and goats makes clear (25:32. Cf. Rev. 17:14; 19:16). Indeed, his charge had been that he claimed to be king of the Jews (Matt. 27:37; Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38; John 19:19). Thus both Jesus and God are kings. But as the earliest Christians would have it, *Jesus shares in the kingship of God and holds his kingship under God* (cf. 1 Cor. 15:24, 25, 28, italics added).<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> K. A. Busia, *Africa in Search of Democracy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967), 26; quoted in Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 94–95.

<sup>101</sup> Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 95.



Continuing to mine the analogy of the royal court, Pobee describes Jesus as the *okyeame* or chief linguist/spokesman for the Chief. Pobee finds a parallel in the Johannine picture of Jesus as the *logos*—the divine word or communication of God to mankind, subordinate in the sense of communicating the Father’s will, but at the same time God himself. Further, Pobee draws on the single-tiered interpretive landscape of the Akan to explain Jesus’ priestly role in the heavenly courts of God as he intercedes on behalf of mankind—as the Chief does. The Chief’s crossing of the permeable boundaries in the cosmos of Akan traditional thought and the linguist’s role in mediation set the stage for Pobee’s Christological assertions.

*Jesus’ priesthood is exercised not only on the earth but also in the heavens, just as the Epistle to the Hebrews argues.* And it is by virtue of that priestly role that he brings salvation and forgiveness of sin to men, though in his case he is both priest and victim. It is by virtue of that role that he demands of men obedience to his will, which is the same as the will of God.<sup>102</sup>

Two points can be made about Pobee’s use of the Akan category of Chief. First, Pobee recognizes that this category has problems, including the risk of inculcating a *theologia gloriae* in the absence of a *theologia crucis*.

The Chief analogy denotes authority and power derived from other ways than the way of suffering. In the Christian tradition, Jesus enters into glory through suffering and humility (Luke 24:46ff). These two aspects are symbolized by the Cross, which proved a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to the Gentiles (I Cor. 1:23).<sup>103</sup>

Second, Pobee points out that the Chief as *Nana* should serve as a reminder to the Church that it serves under the Kingship of Jesus. He writes, ‘an Akan proverb runs thus: If Tsibo (a chief) says he can do something, then he does it with his followers. ...

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<sup>102</sup> Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 95–96; italics added.

<sup>103</sup> Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 97.

An African who affirms that Jesus is *Nana* also should relate that message to the issues of human and social justice in African countries as in the rest of the world.’<sup>104</sup>

Pobee believes that the royal-priestly Christology he has constructed around the multi-faceted designation *Nana*—used to refer to ancestor, chief-king-priest, and linguist—is highly suitable for presenting the claims of Christianity to his own Akan people—in short for doing the work of theological education, even while granting the legitimacy of other Christological formulations.<sup>105</sup>

#### 4.2.6 Development in Pobee’s Christological Thinking

After publishing *Toward an African Theology* in 1979, John Pobee wrote virtually nothing more on Jesus as ancestor, and referenced this earlier work only twice in his later writings.<sup>106</sup> Over time, his interest shifted from articulating a comprehensive Christology to engaging in a more detailed discussion of the religio-cultural factors that any Christology claiming to be African must consider: culture, violence, post-Enlightenment epistemology, materialism, and poverty.<sup>107</sup> In ‘African Theology

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<sup>104</sup> Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 98. Both Pobee and Bediako understood the dangers of politicians invoking spiritual authority for their regimes and argued strongly that African political leaders should adopt Jesus’ servant-leadership model. See Kwame Bediako, ‘De-sacralization and Democratization: Some Theological Reflections on the Role of Christianity in Nation-Building in Modern Africa’, *Transformation* 12, no. 1 (January 1995): 5–11. He also writes about this in *Jesus in Africa*. See also John Pobee, *Religion and Politics in Ghana* (Accra: Asempa, 1991), 146.

<sup>105</sup> Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 98.

<sup>106</sup> He mentions his ancestor Christology in a sermon published in 2000 (John S. Pobee, ‘Sermon at the Closing Service’, *Mission Studies* 16, nos. 1–2 [2000]: 103–12) and in an article he wrote for John Mbiti’s *Festschrift* in 1993 (John S. Pobee, ‘African Theology Revisited’, in *Religious Plurality in Africa: Essays in Honour of John S. Mbiti*, ed. Jacob K. Olupona and Sulayman S. Nyang [Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1993], 135–43). It is interesting to note that even in his short book, *West Africa, Christ Would Be an African Too* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1996)—where one might expect him to return to his ancestor Christology—he does not. Instead, he deals exclusively with the necessity to articulate Christology out of an African cultural context. Finally, none of the contributors to a 2014 *Festschrift* written in Pobee’s honour wrote on Christology or referenced his work on ancestor Christology. C. N. Omenyo and E. B. Anum, eds., *Trajectories of Religion in Africa: Essays in Honour of John S. Pobee* ((Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014). Notably, all of Aye-Addo’s references and footnotes in his discussion of Pobee’s Christology come from Pobee’s 1979 work.

<sup>107</sup> John S. Pobee, ‘Skenosis: The Tabernacling of the Word’, *Mission Studies* 3, no. 2 (1986): 4–13. Elsewhere, Pobee lists six items, with obvious overlap: culture, religious pluralism, politics, poverty,

Revisited', he reveals part of the reason for this shift. In the 1970s, African theologians were complaining about the lack of original theological contributions written from an African perspective. Pobee's ancestor Christology was an attempt to make just such a contribution. In 1993, he wrote:

My first major escapade into this area was when I published *Towards an African Theology* (1979). ... At that point very few were putting nuts and bolts on to the discipline of African theology. It had been mostly rhetoric about the need to search for and develop African theology, with much castigation of the northern captivity of church and theology in Africa.<sup>108</sup>

Seven years later, in a sermon delivered at the closing service of the International Association for Mission Studies conference on the theme 'Reflecting Jesus Christ: Crucified and Living in a Broken World', we see that Pobee's concern has shifted. He now wants his African colleagues to grapple with the question of how to speak of the unique and absolute claims Christians make for Jesus in a religiously pluralistic context. In Africa, that context included primarily Christians, Muslims, and practitioners of Africa's traditional religions. Though he does not disavow his earlier work depicting Jesus as the 'great Ancestor', Pobee does state that 'I am not fond of the old language of finality or absoluteness of Christ because I do not really understand the philosophical presuppositions of such language'.<sup>109</sup> Pobee does not go into any further detail regarding which presuppositions he finds problematic; what he does say is that if the church in Africa accepts his work on Christ as Ancestor, it 'must address the issue of in what ways Christ is Ancestor *par excellence*'.<sup>110</sup>

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worship, and biblical scholarship. See 'African Theology Revisited', 135–43). See also 'In Search of Christology', 9–20, where he states that a Christology argued in a 'propositional' way will not do justice to the African context where so much theological thinking is carried on by pre-literate people.

<sup>108</sup> Pobee, 'African Theology Revisited', 135–36.

<sup>109</sup> Pobee, 'Sermon at the Closing Service', 109.

<sup>110</sup> Pobee, 'Sermon at the Closing Service', 109. My own reading of Pobee is that he understands the philosophical language involved here quite well, but wants to locate his own work as an African theologian in a different place. This choice on his part causes him to ignore certain passages in the New

In the same sermon, Pobeë also notes what he calls ‘megatrends’ at work in Africa: globalism, regionalism, nationalism, localism, and spiritualism (similar to the factors articulated in ‘Skenosis’ and ‘African Theology Revisited’). How will the gospel ‘tabernacle’ (from the Greek *skenosis*, used in Jn 1.14) in this new context of megatrends and within various cultures such that ‘no culture [is] deemed normative for *either* mission or the gospel’?<sup>111</sup> Pobeë suggests that an understanding of Christ as ‘wounded healer’ may be most appropriate for the current African context.<sup>112</sup> Of the five trends he notes, it is the fifth, spiritualism, which reflects a single-tiered interpretive landscape, and establishes the context in which the church must deal with the other four.<sup>113</sup>

This context of ‘megatrends’ on the one hand and religious pluralism on the other convinced Pobeë that African Christian theologians needed to develop a suitable language for talking about Jesus. Pobeë’s concern is at least apologetic, if not evangelistic. Where the challenge he took up as a younger theologian was to make an original contribution to the writing of an African theology, now he is challenging others to formulate African theology in a context where affirmation of Jesus’ two natures and the claim that Jesus alone is saviour of the world will meet stiff opposition.<sup>114</sup>

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Testament, such as the High Priest’s denunciation of Jesus at his trial before the Sanhedrin based on his understanding of Jesus’ ‘I am’ statement as a metaphysical claim to equality with God (Lk 22.66–71).

<sup>111</sup> Pobeë, ‘Sermon at the Closing Service’, 107.

<sup>112</sup> Pobeë, ‘Sermon at the Closing Service’, 107. See also John S. Pobeë, ‘Healing: An African Christian Theologian’s Perspective’, *International Review of Mission* 83, no. 329 (1994): 247–55 for a more thorough discussion of the practice of healing within AICs and the influence this was having on the mission founded churches as well. *Wounded Healer* is also the title of Henri Nouwen’s extraordinary little book on making space for wounded people at the place of our own woundedness. Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society*. New York: Doubleday, 1972.

<sup>113</sup> I am thinking here of the approach taken by someone like Mensa Otabil in Ghana, whose International Central Gospel Church, is headquartered in Accra. His message of empowerment is firmly rooted in both an evangelical reading of Scripture and a biblically-based justice emphasis.

<sup>114</sup> He writes, ‘If theology is to serve the coherence and peace of society, then African theology has to be dialectical and dialogical. *Developing the exact contours of the dialectic and dialogue is a task to be*

This shift in emphasis raises a question: why does Pobee not appeal to the Akan religio-culture and the divine-human functionality of the *Nana* Chief to further elucidate the divine-human person of Jesus in conversations with Muslims and practitioners of African traditional religions? Adopting this as his starting point would not require him to defend himself on the basis of western philosophical presuppositions, and it would bring fully into the conversation the single-tiered unitive perspective on reality that is shared by followers of Christianity, Islam, and Africa's traditional religions. In this, I believe John Pobee missed an opportunity to advance the conversation he most wanted to see take place.

### 4.3 Comparing Bediako and Pobee's Christologies

One way to compare the Christological writings of Kwame Bediako and John Pobee is to ask whether they have answered their own questions. Pobee's question was 'Why should an Akan relate to Jesus of Nazareth, who does not belong to his clan, family, tribe, and nation?' Bediako's question, originally formulated by John Taylor, was 'if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions that Africans are asking, what would he look like?' Both Kwame Bediako and John Pobee use the *Nana*/ancestor category, understood in the expanded lexical context of Akan religio-culture, to develop a biblical Christology, and in doing so, answer their respective questions.

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*brought to perfection by African theology.* ... Christianity makes claims about the person of Jesus Christ, a first century Jew who went about preaching the nearness of the sovereign rule of God and was consequently killed by an alliance of the Roman totalitarian regime and religious leadership of Judaism and who, as we believe, was vindicated by God. Two aspects of the foregoing are of special concern to us. First, the creeds of the church have defined the person of Jesus in terms of his humanity and divinity. With regard to humanity there is no difficulty with peoples of other faiths. But with the claims to divinity there certainly is difficulty with Islam. The dialogue on that matter is yet to be seriously on the agenda of African theology. In any case there is need to do more work on stating the basic affirmations of Christology. Second, the more difficult issue is the matter of the centrality of Christ or what used to be called finality or absoluteness of Christ. The terminology of finality and absoluteness is anything but acceptable in a plural context. I believe African theology is yet to address the matter of the uniqueness or centrality of Christ.' Pobee, 'African Theology Revisited', 139–40; italics added.

These two theologians differ, however, in their use of this category and the theology they develop around it. Pobee uses the *Nana* category as a teaching tool to establish for average Akan Christians why they can now relate to Jesus as one of their own. He does so by building on their pre-existing understanding of the many meanings of *Nana*. Bediako, on the other hand, uses the *Nana* category for a more apologetic or evangelistic purpose, in line with the question he is trying to answer. His goal is to show Akan who are not yet believers how it is that Jesus answers their need for an all-sufficient mediator between them and *Onyankopon*. In short, Pobee's purpose is primarily didactic and aimed at believers; Bediako's purpose is evangelistic/apologetic and targets those who are not yet believers.<sup>115</sup> With this difference in mind, we can see how Bediako uses Scripture as a lens with which to view Akan religio-culture while Pobee asks how Jesus conforms to the Akan religio-cultural understanding of *Nana*/ancestor.

Bediako criticizes Pobee on the grounds that he does not allow 'biblical revelation' a loud enough voice, assuming similarities between Akan and biblical world-views that may not be there. A case in point might be the parallels Pobee sees between the Akan Chief/King and biblical portrayals of Yahweh and Jesus as kings. A Trinitarian understanding of the godhead and Jesus' standing as 'King of kings' would certainly have occurred to Bediako as issues Pobee should have at least addressed. In Bediako's opinion, these shortcomings mean that no real encounter is able to take place between these two worlds. The result is that Jesus, even as the Great Ancestor, still does not make contact with the non-Christian Akan who does not see how Jesus belongs in his world.

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<sup>115</sup> I am indebted to Dr. Pobee himself for this description of the difference between himself and Kwame Bediako.

Because [Pobee] approaches the problem largely through Akan wisdom sayings and proverbs, he does not deal sufficiently with the religious nature of the question. In addition, he does not let the biblical revelation speak sufficiently in its own terms into the Akan situation. He too easily assumes similarities between Akan and Biblical (for him, 'Jewish') world-views, underestimates the potential for conflict and so does not achieve real encounter. For if we claim as the Greatest Ancestor one who, at the superficial level, 'does not belong to his clan, family, tribe and nation', the Akan non-Christian might well feel that the very grounds of his identity and personality are taken away from him. It is with such fears and dangers, as well as the meanings and intentions behind the old allegiances that a fresh understanding of Christ has to deal.<sup>116</sup>

I believe that in this critique Bediako is looking not at whether Jesus is more than superficially a part of an Akan's 'clan, family, tribe or nation', but whether this Jesus is able to sufficiently fulfil the role of mediator. Bediako appears to miss the fact that Pobee emphasizes the role of Jesus as 'chief linguist' within the expanded lexical horizon of *Nana*. The role of the *Nana*/chief is, according to Pobee, a 'composite office' with the chief functioning as a 'judge, a commander-in-chief, a legislator and the executive and administrative head of the community. It was not many offices, but a simple composite office to which various duties and activities, rights and obligations were attached.'<sup>117</sup> The *okyeame* (chief linguist) becomes, Pobee argues, a landing place for Jesus as the divine *logos*. As the *okyeame* is to the chief, so Jesus is to God the Father, with all the nuances of divinity and humanity captured in the *Nana* lexical horizon. Pobee summarizes:

In our Akan Christology we propose to think of Jesus as the *okyeame*, or linguist, who in all public matters was as the Chief, God, and is the first officer of the state, in this case, the world. This captures something of the Johannine portrait of Jesus as the Logos, being at one and the same time

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<sup>116</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture*, 13. Aye-Addo agrees with Bediako: 'One needs to go well beyond proverbs to provide religious and spiritual reasons for why an outsider like Jesus could become one's ancestor. Akan wisdom sayings and proverbs are idiomatic expressions that speak to various issues regarding life, work, ethics, and relationships. They are not necessarily intended to inform the society about its spiritual universe, though some of them may give statements that may inform the Akan about how to behave in relation to the myriad of spirits.' Aye-Addo, *Akan Christology*, 85.

<sup>117</sup> Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 95–96.

divine and yet subordinate to God. Again, Jesus as a chief is human and shares common humanity with the rest of mankind. He is totally dependent on God. Further, just as the Chief exercises a sacral and priestly role as well, so too does Jesus exercise a sacral and priestly function between God and men.<sup>118</sup>

Pobee's Christological writings differ from those of Bediako for the very reason that he starts with the Akan definitions of ancestor and chief while Bediako tries to exploit the biblical picture of Jesus as one who came from God and took on human flesh by traveling through the permeable world of the Akan in order to do what they most wanted the ancestors to do for them. The particular mediatorial role of the Akan ancestor provides Bediako with an analogical landing place; his critique is that Pobee was looking for too direct a line of continuity. I am not convinced that Bediako is correct here. As the above quote demonstrates, Pobee roots Jesus' mediatorial role in his both/and sacral and priestly roles, which are possible in a single-tiered world of a unitive material/spiritual reality. In short, when we take the different questions they were asking sufficiently into account, we can see that both Pobee and Bediako look for analogical landing places from their understanding of the *Nana* category.

Bediako's concerns with Pobee's Christology might best be characterized this way: Pobee does not allow Scripture to exercise as much control over what he accepts and discards from the Akan religio-cultural context as he should. For example, when Pobee considers Jesus' humanity as an Akan understands being human, he writes, 'Jesus, like other men, was flesh and therefore potentially capable of sinning, sharing with the rest of mankind the consequences of being in the flesh'.<sup>119</sup> This opens the door to the charge of 'adoptionism'. When Pobee continues, 'Jesus was unique because of his singular devotion to the will of God, to the bitterest end of the death on the cross

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<sup>118</sup> Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 95–96.

<sup>119</sup> Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 84.



(Mark 14.36; Phil. 2.7-8), [Jesus] remained sinless, putting up a successful fight against the downward pulling forces resulting from being in the flesh',<sup>120</sup> he further encourages an understanding of Jesus' divinity that resulted from his obedience rather than being rooted in his essential being from all eternity. The 'adoptionist' sound of Pobee's Christology may account for some of Bediako's problems with Pobee's work. On the other hand, Pobee was explicit in affirming both Jesus' full humanity and his full divinity.

Unlike Pobee, Bediako is willing to use metaphysical categories to describe Jesus' person, reducing the possibility of his own Christology being adoptionistic. On the other hand, Bediako understands there is a danger in the *Christus Victor* understanding of Jesus because it opens the way for overemphasizing Jesus' divinity and undervaluing his humanity. In short, even as they do their theology in the religio-cultural context of the single-tiered unitive perspective, both Pobee and Bediako bump up against Christological problems that must be addressed.

A second point of comparison between Pobee and Bediako is their approach to Scripture. Pobee adopts the hermeneutical tools of higher criticism. At the same time, he wants to de-privilege the Jewish and Greco-Roman cultural contexts of the western theological tradition—particularly the latter's philosophical categories—in order to make room for the Akan religio-cultural context as a valid receptor for the gospel message. He preserves Jesus' humanity and divinity, terms which have their own history in Jewish and Greco-Roman culture, but only after demonstrating how an Akan understands those terms. However, by adopting the liberation hermeneutic—a thoroughly western, post-Enlightenment, and hence two-tiered non-unitive

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<sup>120</sup> Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 84.

perspective—Pobee works against his own Akan religio-cultural worldview.<sup>121</sup>

Bediako's understanding of language and translation, on the other hand, allows him to work with a much more robust Scripture that has not been disenchanted by modern higher criticism. It is worth noting here that Pobee appears to have circulated primarily with Protestants in the World Council of Churches sphere, while Bediako was trained, and operated most freely, within the evangelical world. Being in conversation with a community which accepted the higher critical approach may account for Pobee's failure to see how the single-tiered unitive perspective, shared by both his own Akan religio-culture and Scripture, might have provided him with a more internally consistent hermeneutical foundation as he worked with Scripture.

## 5. AN AKAN THEOLOGY OF ANCESTORS

In their own ways, both John Pobee and Kwame Bediako—along with the other Akan theologians we are looking at—take the mediatorial function of the ancestors in Akan primal religion and assign it to Jesus. Notably, however, none of these scholars rejects the reality of the ancestors. In this section, therefore, I will look at the question of what is to be done with the ancestors.

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<sup>121</sup> Pobee discusses his view of Scripture in, 'Exploring Together From Diverse Cultures', *International Review of Mission* 84, no. 334 (1995): 259–72. First, he argues that the Bible is mediated through humans, so the '*residuum evangelium*' of God's Word must be discerned amidst the personality and individuality of the writers. One knows they have the '*residuum*' because it has the power to transform, as people are convicted of their sin, search for hope, and are linked to worship. Second, in looking at texts we are looking at interpreted texts, never the raw data alone. Pobee writes, 'We need well-grounded biblical hermeneutics of liberation rooted in historical criticism and a liberative and liberating ideology. That is what I see to be the significance of black, feminist, womanist, Latin American and Asian theologies. But that task of biblical hermeneutics of liberation is essential to arriving at the *residuum evangelium*' (265). He appears to set out in this section what he considers to be the gospel, or the *residuum evangelium*: belief in one Creator God who is sovereign. He does not see the 'winning of souls' to be the heart of mission; rather, the goal of mission is the 'affirmation of the Creator God' (267). Further, he notes that 'the belief in the Creator God who created humanity and the world is a biblical affirmation, particularly in the Jahwist tradition preserved in Genesis 2:19–25. But this belief was not peculiar to the biblical faith; it was an article of faith throughout the ancient Near East' (267). This passage may contain evidence of Pobee's search for a language that Christians could use in their inter-faith conversations in Africa and elsewhere.

Bediako retains the ancestors in his theological thinking in part because they exist within Akan culture and to leave them out would deprive the Akan of a critical element in the world they understand themselves to inhabit. He writes,

Since ‘salvation’ in the traditional African world involves a certain view of the realm of spirit-power and its effects upon the physical and spiritual dimensions of human existence, our reflection about Christ must speak to the questions posed by such a world-view. The needs of the African world require a view of Christ that meets those needs. And so who Jesus is in the African spiritual universe must not be separated from what he does and can do in that world. The way in which Jesus relates to the importance and function of the ‘spirit fathers’ or ancestors is crucial.<sup>122</sup>

Bediako’s primary reason for retaining the ancestors, however, is that he finds a role for them in the Bible itself. He speaks of them as ‘preparers of the way’ and what I will call ‘partners along the way’

Pobee connects his Christology directly to the ancestor category as understood by the Akan. In another work, he briefly draws some connections between ancestors and the ‘communion of saints’.<sup>123</sup> Other African theologians make similar moves: Charles Aye-Addo sees the ancestors as part of the great communion of the saints that transcends death itself, even using the ancestors in his development of an Akan ecclesiology,<sup>124</sup> while Benhardt Quarshie retains the ancestors so that Akan Christians

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<sup>122</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture*, 10. See also, *Christianity in Africa*, 69: ‘If the Christian faith as it was transmitted failed to take serious account of the traditional beliefs held about “gods many and lords many”, ancestors, spirits and other spiritual agencies and their impact on human life, then it also failed to meet the Akan in his personally experienced religious need. Looked at from this perspective, missionary activity rarely amounted to a genuine encounter, and the Christian communities that have resulted have not really known how to relate to their traditional culture in terms other than those of denunciation or of separateness.’ Chapter 12 of *Christianity in Africa* is entitled, ‘Christian Religion and the African World-view – Will Ancestors Survive?’

<sup>123</sup> John S. Pobee and Gabriel Ositelu II, *African Initiatives in Christianity: The Growth, Gifts and Diversities of Indigenous African Churches, A Challenge to the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: WCC, 1998).

<sup>124</sup> Aye-Addo, *Akan Christology*. Charles Nyamiti (like other Roman Catholic scholars) also finds a landing place for the ancestors in their church’s doctrine of the ‘communion of the saints’. See Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor*.

might find a place of fulfilment for their deepest yearnings.<sup>125</sup> Each of these theologians finds a place for the ancestors within African theology because ancestors are real and operative within the single-tiered, permeable material-spiritual universe of the Akan. Not to find a place for the ancestors would be tantamount to ignoring reality.<sup>126</sup> Consequently, Bediako is rightly concerned with what will happen when the Akan are stripped of the ancestors' help. He explicitly says, 'the traditional African world involves a certain view of the realm of spirit-power and its effects upon the physical and spiritual dimensions of human existence'.<sup>127</sup> Thus, any Christian theology that he and his colleagues produce must necessarily take that worldview into account. As already noted, Bediako implicitly criticizes Christian theology in the West for its inability to 'avoid destructive dichotomies in epistemology', something Africans operating out of the single-tiered unitive perspective and the interpretive landscape that results do not do.<sup>128</sup>

### **5.1 Ancestors as an Analogical Landing Place for the Communion of Saints**

Both Bediako and Pobee discuss the ancestor category as an analogical landing place for the biblical idea of the 'communion of saints'. Pobee does so only briefly, in a book he wrote with Gabriel Ositelu II, then primate of the Aladura church in Africa. In a section discussing AICs' possible contributions to the global church, they mention AICs' understanding of the communion of saints, commenting that 'the relationship

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<sup>125</sup> Quarshie, 'Jesus, Pioneer and Perfecter of Faith', 21–37.

<sup>126</sup> Shortly after the publication of his book, *The New Faces of Christianity*, Philip Jenkins was interviewed by National Public Radio presenter Terry Gross. In that interview, Jenkins noted that Africans study very carefully the genealogies in Scripture (which westerners by and large ignore) because to know one's ancestors is to know who you are. Philip Jenkins, interview by Terry Gross, *Fresh Air*, aired October 3, 2006 on NPR, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6188150>.

<sup>127</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture*, 10.

<sup>128</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 210.

between the living and the dead enrich our churches as the living nurture the memory of our predecessors *who are still influencing our own lives by their contributions to the welfare of our communities*'.<sup>129</sup> Pobee thus accepts the ancestors' continuing influence on the community, but does not clarify exactly what this means. Unfortunately, Pobee did not expand on this train of thought.

Bediako, on the other hand, discusses a theology of ancestors—now that they are no longer mediators—at much greater length.<sup>130</sup> Indeed, Bediako's understanding of ancestors as part of the communion of saints proceeds directly from his ancestor Christology.<sup>131</sup> In other words, once Jesus is understood as fulfilling the mediatorial role of ancestors, the way is clear to a new understanding of the role ancestors can and do play among the Akan. Bediako finds a model for this new role of the ancestors in the patriarchs of the Old Testament. To better see how Bediako uses the ancestor category as a landing place for a biblical understanding of the communion of saints it is helpful to put him in conversation with the Roman Catholic scholar Edward Fasholé-Luke.

## 5.2 Bediako: Ancestors as 'Preparers of the Way'

Bediako sees in the Old Testament a history of God's dealings with 'His people where faith was not perfect'.<sup>132</sup> Bediako understands the biblical patriarchs as preparers of the way for Jesus' coming, and this allows him to see his own Akan ancestors, whose faith was also imperfect, in the same light. This theology of ancestors allows Africans to see

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<sup>129</sup> Pobee and Ositelu, *African Initiatives in Christianity*, 70–71; italics added.

<sup>130</sup> See Chapter 12 ('Christian Religion and the African World-view: Will Ancestors Survive?') in Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*. Interestingly, Aye-Addo does not address this passage in Bediako's writing.

<sup>131</sup> 'There is, it is true, an obvious Christological dimension to any consideration of the place of ancestors in the spiritual universe of Christian consciousness. When Jesus Christ appears in the world of distributed power, which I consider the universe of the African primal world to be, some important changes are bound to occur. ... One of the values of an Ancestor-Christology is precisely that it helps to clarify the place and significance of natural ancestors.' Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 217.

<sup>132</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 226.

their ancestral history as a kind of parallel to the history of the biblical patriarchs. The choices, successes, and failures of both are accurately judged only by the gospel: did their actions further truth along lines revealed most completely in Christ?

Bediako believes Fasholé-Luke forces biblical revelation into the communion of saints as a pre-existing category of Roman Catholic dogma rather than allowing an understanding of the communion of the saints to emerge from the Akan's 'quests and responses to the Transcendent' in their encounter with Scripture.<sup>133</sup> In Bediako's opinion, Fasholé-Luke uses this dogmatic category to make a place for those pre-Christian ancestors—about whose eternal destiny many Africans are concerned—without taking Scripture adequately into account. Fasholé-Luke, according to Bediako, interprets 'the phrase "communion of saints" to mean "fellowship with holy people of all ages and the whole company of heaven through participation in the holy sacraments"'.<sup>134</sup> Bediako asserts that this obliges Fasholé-Luke 'to draw in notions like receiving the sacraments on behalf of the dead, prayers for the dead, and pleading for the salvation of the dead'.<sup>135</sup>

Bediako, on the other hand, argues that a 'theology of ancestors' is about interpreting the past to show that our present understanding of the gospel was 'truly anticipated and prefigured in the quests and responses to the Transcendent',<sup>136</sup> of his own Akan people. Bediako argues that a 'theology of ancestors' is an unavoidable by-product and corollary of the continuity with which God has borne witness to himself in every time and place. The gospel introduces new criteria for interpreting who among the

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<sup>133</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 224.

<sup>134</sup> Fasholé-Luke, 'Ancestor Veneration and the Communion of Saints', 209–10.

<sup>135</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 224.

<sup>136</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 224–25.

witnesses in the old pre-Christian tradition are authentic. Specifically, Bediako asserts that those who by their actions anticipated and prepared the way for Christ's coming are ancestors of the faith on a par with the patriarchs of the Old Testament.<sup>137</sup> So, for example, Bediako regards Korankye, the nineteenth-century chief of Fomena who was cruelly killed for opposing human sacrifice, an ancestor of Asante Christianity because he prepared the way for Christ's valuation of all human life.<sup>138</sup>

Bediako notes approvingly that J. B. Danquah was happy to include Johannes Christaller as an Akan ancestor because of his work on the Twi language, which prepared the way for the Akan people to hear the gospel.<sup>139</sup> Additionally, Bediako points to the Anglican *Prayer Book* of Kenya, which gives thanks for the 'faithful ancestors', by which it means those 'who were faithful to the Supreme God, before the arrival of the Gospel'. After quoting the relevant portion of the *Prayer Book*, Bediako writes, 'Here, past and present meet, the ancestors are fully within the new community of faith, and the living and the "living dead" pray together, indicating what one possible response to the question of ancestors could well be in the meeting of the Christian religion and the African world.'<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Bediako *Christianity in Africa*, 223–30.

<sup>138</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 225.

<sup>139</sup> Johannes Gottlieb Christaller (1827–1895) was a German philologist and missionary with the Basel Mission. In addition to working with two African colleagues to translate the Bible into Twi, he produced a Twi grammar, a Twi dictionary, and collection of Twi proverbs. Christaller played an important role in helping to establish Twi as a literary language and encouraging its use among Christian scholars. See L. H. Ofosu-Appiah, 'Christaller, Johannes Gottlieb (A)', *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*, 1997, accessed April 29, 2014, <https://dacb.org/stories/ghana/christaller-j/>.

<sup>140</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 230. Bediako would also appreciate that *The Book of Common Worship* includes the following as part of the liturgy: 'Gracious God, you have made us one with all your people in heaven and on earth', and 'In union with your church in heaven and on earth, we pray, O God, that you will fulfill your eternal purpose in us and in all the world.' The Episcopal Book of Common Prayer has this, 'Therefore we praise you, joining our voices with Angels and Archangels and with all the company of heaven, who for ever sing this hymn to proclaim the glory of your Name: Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory.' This reference to the church joining with the saints is an ancient tradition in the Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican traditions – evidence again of 'memories' not altogether lost.

Bediako's objection to Fasholé-Luke is that he has not established clear biblical criteria for who qualifies as an ancestor and can thus be included in the communion of the saints. Bediako himself argues in favour of biblically-based criteria such as preparing the way for Christ. In the end, Bediako is not arguing about whether ancestors can be living members of the communion of saints, but about which ancestors qualify for this position.<sup>141</sup>

The young Akan scholar Charles Aye-Addo helps us understand something more about the difference between Bediako and Fasholé-Luke. Essentially, Fasholé-Luke uses the ancestors as a landing place for the biblical understanding of the 'communion of saints' within his own understanding of the Church. Bediako, on the other hand, uses the ancestors as a landing place for his understanding of his Akan ancestors function in parallel with the Old Testament patriarchs. In other words, Fasholé-Luke uses the category of ancestors to understand something about the church, while Bediako retains the ancestors as preparers for Jesus' coming.<sup>142</sup> The difference is more apparent, however, than real. Aye-Addo, who is closer to Fasholé-Luke than Bediako, articulates a position that does not contradict anything in Bediako's writing on the ancestors.

Protestant theology has not adequately developed the concept of the communion of saints that transcends the barrier of death. Even though the tradition is aware that the church is a community that includes the ancestors, it has not quite found a way to express this faith or to develop the theological significance of that faith. ... It is our view that the use of the image of the ancestor ... can be very useful to further develop our

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<sup>141</sup> Diane Stinton, in a personal correspondence, said this: 'I certainly recall [Bediako] speaking about both Akrofi and Christaller being his ancestors in faith, and what significance this had in his own understanding and practice of faith. He had portraits of both in his office and he would look to them for inspiration in his academic work and ministry.'

<sup>142</sup> Bediako notes, for example, that Byang Kato, who allowed for virtually no continuity between ATRs and Christianity, still made reference to the prophetic activity of a pre-Christian source who declared that a white person would come to tell the people about the Supreme God—a prophecy that was fulfilled, in Kato's estimation, when the colonial missionaries arrived. Bediako believes that a theology of Ancestors leads to an understanding of the 'communion of saints' which includes among the 'multitude no one could count' (Rv 7.9–10), local ancestors such as these pre-Christian 'prophets', who prepared the way for the coming of the gospel. See Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 223ff.



understanding of the church that transcends all barriers of class, tribe, nation and even the boundaries of death.<sup>143</sup>

So, while Bediako rejected the ‘communion of the saints’ understanding as he met it in the work of Fasholé-Luke, his own writing, particularly as it emerges from the single-tiered unitive perspective on reality, certainly holds out a place for ancestors as part of the living community of faith.

### 5.3 Ancestors as Partners along the Way of Pilgrimage

In addition to seeing ancestors as ‘preparers of the way’, Bediako also understands ancestors as what I call partners along the way of pilgrimage. They are partners in the sense that, because they once received true, if incomplete, revelation from God, they continue as fellow pilgrims now in that revelation made complete in Christ. Bediako makes this point in an article published posthumously in the *Journal of African Christian Thought*, where he notes that most English translations render the Greek phrase τοῖς πατέράσιν in Heb 1.1 ‘our fathers/ancestors’.<sup>144</sup> When the word ‘our’ is inserted, the implication is that the writer is thinking only of Jewish ancestors in the Old Testament. Yet the exact translation—which, as Bediako points out, is reflected in the Twi translation of this verse—is ‘to *the* fathers/ancestors’, which would then include all ancestors. Consequently, God ‘did not speak only to the Jewish fathers, but to all those who were like “fathers” in all contexts’.<sup>145</sup> To be sure, what God has spoken through Jesus, the Son, is unique, God cannot be fully known without that Word. Bediako’s point is that his own Akan ancestors can be conduits of revelation, even if that

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<sup>143</sup> Aye-Addo, *Akan Christology*, 174.

<sup>144</sup> The Greek text—Πολυμερὶς καὶ πολυτρόπως πάλαι ὁ θεὸς λαλήσας τοῖς πατέράσιν ἐν τοῖς προφήταις—has been translated variously into English as ‘Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets (ESV), ‘God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways’ (NAS), and ‘In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways’ (NIV).

<sup>145</sup> Bediako, ‘Christian Faith and African Culture’, 47.

revelation is incomplete until Jesus is made known. In this sense, Jesus is the true and complete ancestor because it is in him that people find the rest of the story of redemption.

Earlier, we discussed Bediako's idea that the mediatorial role of the ancestors resulted from the community projecting onto the ancestors an ability they did not possess.<sup>146</sup> At the same time, Bediako never considered the ancestors themselves to be mythical. Benhardt Quarshie agrees, writing that 'the ancestors are too real for the African to be simply attributed to myth'.<sup>147</sup> We see Bediako's non-mythical understanding of the ancestors in one of his first published articles, written in 1983, 'Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religions'. Here Bediako writes about ancestors within the material-spiritual universe which he, as an Akan, accepts as real, without making any references to myth.<sup>148</sup> Bediako argues quite clearly that the ancestors are not to be seen as a primary source of blessing, though they were once thought to be so. 'Once Christ has come', he writes, 'the ancestors are cut off as the means of blessing for we lay our power lines differently'.<sup>149</sup> What changes, he argues, is their role in the community, not their continued existence. Indeed, he writes, 'They simply become members of the community. We may even include them in our intercessions'.<sup>150</sup> Bediako argues that the ancestors are available for Christ to use as he deems proper in the lives of his people, and that Christ may bring messages to them. He writes,

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<sup>146</sup> See section 3.3 above.

<sup>147</sup> Quarshie, 'Jesus, Pioneer and Perfecter of Faith', 30, f.n. 36.

<sup>148</sup> Bediako, 'Biblical Christologies', 164.

<sup>149</sup> Bediako, 'Biblical Christologies', 166.

<sup>150</sup> Bediako, 'Biblical Christologies', 166.

Suppose my father who has gone ahead is in the hands of God. I can rejoice and every now and then I can address him through Christ. Not that I will hear something back. But if God so desires and chooses he may give me [a] message from my father because he knows what my father means to me. If Jesus knows that the only way he will speak to me or get through to me is through my father, he will give me a word from my father. I am willing to let him do that and open myself to that; but on the understanding that I am now in Christ and I do not depend upon my father for power any more apart from complete dependence on Christ as a source of power and blessing.<sup>151</sup>

Here we again see Bediako operating out of the single-tiered, sacramental Akan universe. Before becoming Christians, but feeling the need for mediators who had their best interests at heart, the community asked the ancestors to intercede for them before the Supreme Being. As we have seen, Bediako argues that, with the coming of Christ, ancestors become partners in Christ with the living. Ancestors are real—their existence even now in the presence of Jesus is real and, within the permeable single-tiered interpretive landscape of the Akan, they continue to interact with the living. This line of reasoning is one that the Akan Christian community understands.<sup>152</sup>

## 6. CONCLUSION

We will bring this discussion to a close with several final observations. First, we should note that each of the Akan theologians we have considered use the *Nana*/ancestor category as it emerges from the unitive perspective of the single-tiered understanding of reality. This alone confirms the importance of the single-tiered perspective for the proper understanding and interpretation of Akan Christian theology. Some theologians, including John Pobee and Kwame Bediako, use this category to elucidate an Akan

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<sup>151</sup> Bediako, 'Biblical Christologies', 166.

<sup>152</sup> This, of course, implies apologetic usefulness that Bediako wants to exploit. Bediako asks whether we can 'commend the meanings of Jesus Christ as disclosed to us in the Scriptures, to men and women in their own worlds of faith, respecting their personality as beings created, like ourselves, in the image of the one and the same Creator, and yet seeking to "move them Christward in the freedom of their personal wills"'. Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, 44.

Christology. In Pobee's case, it is used for didactic purposes, primarily among fellow believers; in Bediako's case, it is used for more apologetic and evangelistic purposes. Once the mediatorial role of the ancestors has been replaced by the mediation of Jesus, a discussion of the active participation of ancestors in the life of the community—and what form that participation might take—followed. What cannot be forgotten, however, is that without the single-tiered unitive perspective on reality serving as a foundation, this theological conversation evaporates into mere myth. When we understand that these theologians see the Bible itself describing a single-tiered reality, we can clearly see why they believe their contributions deserve a place in the global theological conversation.<sup>153</sup> In essence, they see themselves returning the church to the Bible's way of seeing the world.

Second, both Pobee and Bediako speak of *Nana*/ancestors as they are understood within the lexical horizons of Twi, a language which itself reflects the primal single-tiered interpretive landscape. Here in particular, nuances begin to appear. Bediako finds a helpful analogical landing place in this category by essentially differentiating Jesus from the ancestors, seeing him entirely taking over their role within Akan traditional religion. Pobee, on the other hand, makes extensive use of the *Nana*/ancestor category to demonstrate how Jesus inhabits it closely enough that the Akan people can accept Jesus as their ancestor even though he is not an Akan himself.

This leads, third, to the value of the single-tiered unitive perspective on reality as a hermeneutical key for evaluating the arguments we have considered here. For example, Pobee's Christology, which came early in his career, ploughed new ground,

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<sup>153</sup> Bediako explicitly argues that Africa has a great deal to teach the global North, which has only recently engaged in dialogue with religious pluralism, on how to present the gospel, because Africa has continually existed in such a world. See Chapter 3 ('How is Jesus Christ Lord? Evangelical Christian Apologetics amid African Religious Pluralism') in Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, 34–45.

but might have avoided an apparent drift toward Adoptionism and Subordinationism if he had used the Akan roles of ancestor, chief, linguist, and *Nana*, as analogical landing places rather than roles demanding Jesus' conformity. Bediako, on the other hand, arguably moves beyond Pobee to see how Jesus is at home in the Akan primal world and can analogically fulfil the mediatorial role previously ascribed to the ancestors. The primary difference between these two scholars is that Pobee tends to see the Akan primal categories as moulds into which Jesus fits, while Bediako sees Jesus fully inhabiting the primal universe and transforming it by his presence.

Other scholars have expanded on Bediako and Pobee's work in various directions. Benhardt Quarshie, reflecting on Bediako's work, is able to argue that Jesus not only replaces the ancestors in their mediatorial role, but also gives Akan Christians a way to realize their deep desire to become 'ancestors' themselves. Clifton Clarke, who worked primarily among the AICs, makes an argument similar to Bediako's, using the resonances of words like *Nana* to find landing places within the Akan worldview for the Jesus revealed in Scripture. Finally, Charles Aye-Addo argues that unless the Akan *Nana* category refers to *Nyame* alone, it cannot provide the power needed by Ghanaian Christians to meet the challenges of this life, filled as it is with danger on every side.

Fourth, by drawing on the *Nana*/ancestor category both Pobee and Bediako give tacit approval to the single-tiered interpretive landscape as it emerges from the unitive perspective as a source of categories for constructing their Christologies. A difference can be seen, however, in how they then use Scripture—or, more precisely, in their hermeneutics. Bediako's evangelical theological training allowed him to access a single-tiered understanding of reality shared by his own Akan primal background and Scripture, which he can then use in the 'conversion' of Akan religio-culture. Even taking into account Opoku Onyinah's observation that the first missionaries to arrive in Ghana had already experienced a weakening of their belief in the supernatural due to

the tacit assumptions of the Enlightenment,<sup>154</sup> their evangelical theology contained the seeds of a full-fledged single-tiered unitive perspective on reality that Bediako and those who followed his lead could and did exploit.

Pobee, on the other hand, appears to straddle his Akan single-tiered religio-cultural background and his favoured higher critical approach to Scripture, with the result that, in his understanding, Jesus fits in with Akan religio-culture but does not perform the kind of transformative role we see in Bediako. In my assessment, the tension between Pobee's own single-tiered Akan religio-culture and the two-tiered hermeneutical approach to Scripture he uses (which is beholden to post-Enlightenment rationalism), weakens his understanding of the ability of the incarnate Christ to fully inhabit and transform Akan religio-culture.

As we have discussed, analogical continuity itself can provide landing places and bridges, but it cannot function as a gatekeeper to the ideas that follow. Whether its purpose is didactic, as with Pobee, or apologetic, as with Bediako, analogical continuity simply opens the door. This is why the necessity of subjecting theology to the scrutiny of the entire church is critical: contributions must come from every tongue, tribe, and nation, but so too must critiques.

Fifth, the question only partially answered by these Akan scholars is what to do with the ancestors once their mediatorial role has been taken from them. While seeming to reject Fasholé-Luke's suggestion that the ancestors can now be embraced as living members of the communion of saints, we see that Bediako is actually quite open to this idea once he has established criteria for who qualifies to participate in this communion.

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<sup>154</sup> Opoku Onyinah writes that it was with 'traditional Christian beliefs in the devil, weakened by the criticisms during the Enlightenment—that missionaries began their ministries in Africa'. Opoku Onyinah, 'Akan Witchcraft and the Concept of Exorcism in the Church of Pentecost' (PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 2002), 133.

Yet Bediako is more suggestive than helpful in stating that ancestors function as ‘preparers of the way’ and partners in the life of the Kingdom. A member of the next generation of Akan scholars, Charles Aye-Addo, is better able to exploit this understanding of the communion of saints within his own Protestant tradition.

Finally, we are beginning to see the fulfilment of Pobee and Bediako’s expectation that African Christian theology would play an increasingly important role in the global theological conversation. We see this in the fact that scholars such as Aye-Addo and Hartman are using Pobee and Bediako as major conversation partners with Karl Barth, arguably the twentieth century’s most important western theologian.<sup>155</sup> Aye-Addo argues that Barth’s rejection of natural theology, rooted in the historical circumstances of Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century, made it impossible for him to be of much use to African theologians whose primal imagination has allowed them to remain open to God’s self-revelation in the natural world. The world of Bediako and Pobee is fundamentally different from the post-Enlightenment world Barth confronted. In Barth’s two-tiered world, the natural overwhelmingly dominated the supernatural, rendering the latter virtually useless as an explanatory category. This is why Aye-Addo finds it so difficult to bring Barth into genuine conversation with Bediako and Pobee.<sup>156</sup> In Aye-Addo’s estimation, Barth necessarily moved to the extreme of questioning any theology that sought continuity with culture.

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<sup>155</sup> Both Aye-Addo and Hartman wrote their dissertations at American universities, which indicates that Bediako is making inroads into the scholarly world of the global North. I find it significant that Bediako does not footnote Barth in any of his works. He does, however, footnote Emil Brunner, who allowed room for ‘natural theology’. In his unpublished PhD dissertation, *Religion, Revelation and Culture in Kwame Bediako and Karl Barth*, Hartman notes that Bediako studied Barth briefly during his time at London Bible College but was put off by a comment Barth made about another African theologian that Bediako considered racist.

<sup>156</sup> Barth was hugely fearful of the risk of idolatry arising out of any attempt to root Christian dogmatics in natural theology. Aye-Addo, as an Akan, simply does not share that fear because he does not believe that Akan religio-culture has been ‘absorbed, domesticated, and distorted’ in the way Barth believed European culture had. Aye-Addo, *Akan Christology*, 158. This is an assertion that deserves more careful

Barth was so alienated by the way the Gospel was compromised within culture and German nationalism that he moved to the extreme of rejecting any form of natural theology or use of cultural elements for the interpretation of Christ. Clearly, Pobee and Bediako are in disagreement with Barth on this and are willing to look within the African cultural resources along with the Bible as sources for the construction of indigenous theology.<sup>157</sup>

As a result, Aye-Addo considers Barth only to dismiss him.

Timothy Hartman, on the other hand, notes two points of contact between Bediako and Barth.<sup>158</sup> The first is their commitment to Scripture as their final authority. The second is that, for all his talk about rejecting natural theology, Barth did in fact make room for it at the end of his *Dogmatics*. Hartman points out that in Volume IV of his *Dogmatics*, Barth speaks of ‘lesser lights’ by which God reveals himself through ‘parables of the Kingdom’ and other ‘lights’. Hartman argues that, in doing so, Barth opens the door (if only ever so slightly) to the possibility of revelation from the sources that Bediako claims within Akan religio-culture. A third point of contact, not mentioned by Hartman, could be the single-tiered unitive perspective on reality itself. Barth’s Christian faith is certainly a supernatural one, in which God moves seamlessly between the physical and spiritual realities of his own creation. On this point, Bediako and Barth would be of one mind. Their differences would revolve around the degree to which genuine revelation takes place within Akan religio-culture. Barth functions here as a helpful critic and challenge to any excessive claims regarding the extent of God’s revelation in and through Akan religio-culture.<sup>159</sup>

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analysis, because Barth’s warning about idolatry is globally applicable. A single-tiered ontology is no inoculation against idolatry, even if it does have the potential to increase sensitivity to idolatry.

<sup>157</sup> Aye-Addo, *Akan Christology*, 158.

<sup>158</sup> Hartman, ‘Religion, Revelation and Culture’. Dr. Hartman very kindly sent me a copy of this work to use in my research.

<sup>159</sup> Bediako’s own hesitation to follow Bolaji Idowu, evidenced in *Theology and Identity*, indicates that he would himself be open to such critique and challenge. In Bediako’s estimation, Idowu went too far by



African Christian theology is clearly having an impact on the global theological conversation. Its assertion and use of the single-tiered unitive perspective on reality challenges the two-tiered worldview of the West to re-think some of its own demythologizing tendencies. It is perhaps fitting, then, to conclude with an observation from Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu regarding Bediako's place *vis à vis* one of the West's best-known New Testament scholars, Rudolph Bultmann.

We know that stalwarts of Western theological scholarship, such as Rudolf Bultmann, refused to accept the reality of the historical Jesus and treated the things of the Spirit as biblical myths. Not so with Kwame Bediako. There may well be others, but he is the only African evangelical theologian and preacher that I have personally witnessed calling for people to come forward to offer their lives to Jesus Christ in a Billy-Graham-style altar call. The point is that he brought his faith to bear on his preaching and scholarship and that, in my judgment, conveyed more about Bediako's Christology than all the writings he may have produced.<sup>160</sup>

In speaking of religio-culture rather than mere culture, a question presents itself. Is there a difference between theology that emerges from cultures that are two-tiered and theology from single-tiered religio-cultures? Asamoah-Gyadu's assertion above suggests an answer. Rudolph Bultmann asked and answered questions that arose from his thoroughly secularized, disenchanted culture, and he did so by erasing the supernatural language of Scripture and replacing it with language whose lexical field does not allow for the supernatural. The naturalistic explanations emerging from this kind of culture conform to the disenchanted reality they represent. Under these circumstances, the Akan theologians we have been considering might well pose the question of whether it is possible to express a biblical Christology using language emerging from the disenchanted reality of the West. Is it possible that only religio-

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virtually stating that God's revelation to Africa in her ATRs was sufficient. Bediako followed and much preferred Mbiti's more measured and qualified acceptance of some revelation from ATRs.

<sup>160</sup> Asamoah-Gyadu, 'Kwame Bediako and the Eternal Christological Question', 51.

cultures have the ability to grasp the Jesus of the Bible? These questions are more nuanced than they appear at first. Bediako, for example, suggests that the West still operates from a single-tiered view of reality, albeit a suppressed one, as seen in the ongoing western fascination with vampires, Ouija boards, and spirituality in general.<sup>161</sup> Additionally, more conservative, historically orthodox western theologians do profess belief in both the natural and supernatural, and this is reflected in their work. The issue may therefore be one of degree and emphasis rather than outright dismissal. The Akan contribution would thus consist of pushing western scholars to re-think the role they give to the supernatural in their theological work.

In the next chapter, I will move from Christology to Christian Anthropology, examining how Mercy Amba Oduyoye finds a category within her own Akan identity to support her ultimate project: affirming the full and equal humanity of both women and men. Once again, the single-tiered unitive perspective on reality and the interpretive landscape that emerges from that perspective will provide a key to understanding Akan theology.

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<sup>161</sup> See Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 18. I will return to this point in the Epilogue.

## Chapter Six

# **A Christian Understanding of Women and Men Emerging from the Interpretive Landscape of the Single-Tiered Unitive Perspective on Reality: A Conversation between Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Other Akan Theological Voices**

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

I have argued to this point that Akan theologians operate out of an identity that is shaped by the single-tiered unitive perspective on reality—a perspective that requires both spiritual and material cause and effect to explain life. I have also demonstrated that this understanding of the world has its roots in the Akan primal worldview that is both past and present to Akan Christian theologians. In Chapter Three, I argued that this single-tiered unitive perspective on reality is at the very heart of the identity that Kwame Bediako points to as a new theological category, methodology, and hermeneutical key for writing African Christian theology. In Chapter Four, I demonstrated how the single-tiered unitive perspective on reality, and the interpretive landscape which results from it, is foundational for what I have called ‘analogical continuity’ between the Akan primal worldview and the worldview of the Bible. This, in turn, allows Christianity to come to the Akan not as a foreign religion but as a thoroughly African faith. In Chapter Five, I looked at the voluminous and nuanced Christological conversation currently taking place in Ghana, which is drawing upon the *Nana*/ancestor category to produce a Christology that is both thoroughly African and thoroughly Christian.

In this chapter, I will bring Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Africa’s leading scholar and practitioner of feminist liberation theology, into the conversation. In particular, I will

show how Oduyoye locates an ontological category for what it means to be fully human in her Akan identity and uses it as a category for accomplishing her primary theological project—establishing the full equality of women and men. Another way of saying this is to note that Oduyoye’s feminist, liberation theology is refracted through the prism of her African identity, where it finds a category for establishing the full equality of men and women.

While there is broad general agreement among the Akan on the material/spiritual composition of people—which requires the *mogya* or blood of the mother and the *ntoro* or spirit of the father—differences do emerge. Oduyoye is unique in using this common understanding to establish the full equality of men and women. In doing so, she demonstrates both boldness and originality, ending in a place where other Akan scholars do not appear to have been able to follow. This fact alone demonstrates the different ways in which Akan theologians use the same tool—that is, the single-tiered perspective—in different ways and to different ends.

Oduyoye’s personal story is inseparable from her project as a liberation and feminist African theologian. I will therefore refer to important elements in her story to demonstrate how she uses both a hermeneutic of experience and a hermeneutic of identity in all her work. I believe that this dual hermeneutic of experience and identity, woven together like the multi-coloured *kente* cloth that Oduyoye loves, is one of Oduyoye’s most significant contributions to the construction of a theology that is both Akan and Christian. With this dual hermeneutic, Oduyoye exegetes both Scripture and Akan folktalk to find support for her project.

As we will see, when Oduyoye uses the Akan ontology of personhood she is demonstrating her consistent use of her Akan identity to provide a theological category and methodology for her work. We will thus see how the single-tiered unitive perspective on reality once again functions to establish an interpretive landscape that

serves as both a foundation and a source of depth for the theological work that follows. At the same time, we will observe how Oduyoye's personal experience as a childless woman and her familiarity with the suffering of the many women she knows and works with are also essential components of her reading of both Scripture and Akan folktalk.<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1 The Girl Called Amba Ewudziwa<sup>2</sup>

In a brief biographical self-portrait in *Beads and Strands*, Oduyoye notes that as a great-grandchild of Christians and the daughter of a Methodist minister, she was born into the mission-founded church in Africa. She therefore recognizes that western colonial influences shaped her understanding of the gospel. Exposed to evangelicalism through the Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union, she noted that she 'could not keep up with the demands of the group'.<sup>3</sup> She goes on to say, 'I felt the traditional Christian creeds and the discipline of the Methodist Church was enough'.<sup>4</sup> Christine Landman tells us that it was during her time at Cambridge that Oduyoye's ecumenical sensibilities grew, leading eventually to her extensive involvement with the World Council of Churches in Geneva and in Africa itself.<sup>5</sup> And it is within this community of believers that she has made her major contributions. In particular, her work with the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians ('the Circle'), which she helped

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<sup>1</sup> I will use the term 'folktalk' inclusively to reference folktales, proverbs, and myths.

<sup>2</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), xi. This is the title Oduyoye gives as she begins to describe herself.

<sup>3</sup> Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands*, xii. Oduyoye studied at Newnham College, Cambridge from 1963–1965.

<sup>4</sup> Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands*, xii. This information seems relevant in that Oduyoye is at several points critical of the hermeneutical approach of evangelical scholarship though it is difficult to discern whether she has in mind the popular application of that hermeneutic within AICs (of which evangelical scholars themselves would have serious questions) or the scholarship of Old and New Testament scholars who differ from the tenets of the higher critical approach which she herself appears to favour. She is not, of course, a professional biblical scholar but rather a 'dogmatician' by training, so that the nuances of biblical criticism are not her specialty.

<sup>5</sup> Christina Landman, 'Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye: Mother of Our Stories', *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 33, no. 1 (2007): 187–204.

found in 1989, has been of major importance in her own life and work.<sup>6</sup> The express purpose of the Circle was and is to foster original research and writing by African women theologians representing the three major religious traditions in contemporary Africa: Christianity, Islam, and Africa's traditional religions.

Oduyoye grew up in the matrilineal social structure of the Akan. She later married Modupe Oduyoye, a Yoruba from Nigeria whose tribe followed a patrilineal social structure, which was something of a shock to the system for Oduyoye when she first encountered it. The contrast between her own matrilineal tribe and the patrilineal practices of her husband's Yoruba tribe became important focal points in her thinking.

## 1.2 Three Major Periods with Three Major Emphases

Christina Landman, a South African scholar, divides Oduyoye's career into three periods. The first two periods run for twenty years each—from the time Oduyoye was twenty until she turned forty, then from forty to sixty; the third has lasted from her sixtieth birthday to the present. Landman sees these three periods moving Oduyoye from being a student/teacher, to a critic, to a healer.<sup>7</sup> These categories are not, of course, absolute but they can be helpful points of reference for the nature of Oduyoye's contributions.

After starting out as a teacher—a typical career path for bright women students in Africa at the end of the colonial period—Oduyoye soon returned to university and

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<sup>6</sup> Oduyoye called together a group of women theologians, all of whom were members of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) in Geneva, Switzerland, at the offices of the World Council of Churches in August of 1988. At this meeting plans were laid for the Circle which had its initial meeting in Ghana in 1989. Because it is not possible to consider Oduyoye outside of her work with the Circle, I will be making use of articles and critiques that discuss its work.

<sup>7</sup> 'These phases encompass firstly a period of classical training and teaching, stretching over a period of roughly 20 years (1953–1973). A second period of 20 years (1974–1994) testifies to her critical and analytical reflection on patriarchal cultures and practices and their influence on church women's lives. A third period starts with the publication of *Daughters of Anowa* in 1995 and the shift from the woman theologian as social critic to the woman theologian as society's healer.' Landman, 'Mother of Our Stories', 187.

earned advanced degrees in religion from both the University of Ghana (1959-1963, where she worked under Noel King) and Cambridge University (1963-1965, where her supervisor was Maurice Wiles). These experiences in Ghana and England helped to shape Oduyoye's understanding of the importance of story in understanding Christian doctrine. Landman, reporting on a personal conversation she had with Oduyoye, tells us:

It was during her studies at these two universities that she was influenced towards the de-dogmatising and re-storying of Christian beliefs. At the University of Ghana Noel King, church historian turned historian of religions, taught her that 'theology was something you struggle to do—not something you receive' (Oduyoye, interview 1998). And at the University of Cambridge Maurice Wiles brought this truth to her attention: doctrines are not from heaven; they are crafted out, by struggling human beings, to feed their spirituality. It was this insight which eventually led Oduyoye to believe that stories, as human constructs of experience, are the places where doctrine and life meet.<sup>8</sup>

The works associated with these various stages help us discern both Oduyoye's movement and her contributions.<sup>9</sup> Early in her academic career and according to

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<sup>8</sup> Landman, 'Mother of Our Stories', 188.

<sup>9</sup> The following outlines Oduyoye's writings according to these three periods. Obviously there is overlap but generally we do see Oduyoye's thought maturing over the years according to this three part structure.

As student/teacher (1953–73): *Youth without Jobs* (Ibadan: Daystar, 1972); *Flight from the Farms* (Ibadan: Daystar, 1973); and 'Unity and Freedom in Africa', *Ecumenical Review* 26, no. 3 (July 1974): 453–58.

As critic (1974–94): 'The Value of African Religious Beliefs and Practices for Christian Theology', in *African Theology en Route: Papers from the Pan African Conference of Third World Theologians, December 17–23, 1977, Accra, Ghana*, ed. Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979), 109–16; 'A Decade and a Half of Ecumenism in Africa', in *Voices of Unity: Essays in Honour of Willem Adolf Visser't Hooft on the Occasion of His 80th Birthday*, ed. Ans Joachim van der Bent (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), 70–77; 'Reflections from a Third World Woman's Perspective: Women's Experience and Liberation Theologies', in *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology: Papers from the Fifth international Conference of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, August 17–29, 1981, New Delhi, India*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1983), 246–55; *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986); 'The Christ for African Women', in *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology – Reflections from the Women's Commission of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988), 35–46; *The Wesleyan Presence in Nigeria* (Ibadan: Sefer, 1992); *Leadership Development in the Methodist Church, Nigeria, 1984–1962* (Ibadan: Sefer, 1992); 'Women and Ritual in Africa', in *The Will To Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa*, ed. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992); 'Violence against Women: Window on Africa', *Voices from the*

Oduyoye's own account of what she took from her two principle mentors, King and Wiles, Oduyoye solidified her commitment to a hermeneutic of experience as the right starting point for theology.

### 1.3 Locating Oduyoye's Work

Of the two major emphases of African Christian Theology—one dealing primarily with culture and identity, the other with liberation (keeping in mind that the two were never and could never be completely exclusive of one another)—Oduyoye's work aligns more closely with the liberation camp.<sup>10</sup> However, the point I want to make is that her particular contribution to feminist, liberation African Christian theology is her insistence that the liberation impetus must be rooted in Africa's religio-culture. In other words, Oduyoye's own Akan identity is critically important—indeed decisive—in shaping her theological approach to the liberation of women from patriarchal and other kinds of oppression. Finding her categories and methodology within her own Akan identity separates Oduyoye from western feminists in particular. In their discussion of Mercy Amba Oduyoye's founding of the Circle, R. N. Fiedler and J. W. Hofmeyer rightly challenge the suggestion that the work of Oduyoye and the Circle was more

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*Third World* 18, no. 1 (1995): 168–76; 'EATWOT: Keynote Address', *Voices from the Third World* 19, no. 1 (1996): 11–34; 'Theological Education for Women in Africa: 1978–1996', in *Transforming Power: Women in the Household of God*, ed. Mercy Amba Oduyoye (Accra-North: Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, 1997), 54–65.

*As healer* (1995–present): *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995); 'Transforming Power: Paradigms from the Novels of Buchi Emecheta', in *Talitha cum! Theologies of African Women*, ed. Nyambura J. Njoroge and Musa W Dube (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2001), 222–44; *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001); *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004); 'Africa', in *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, vol. 3, 1968–2000, ed. John Briggs, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, and Georges Tsetsis (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2004); 'A Letter to my Ancestors', in *Journey of Hope: Towards a New Ecumenical Africa*, ed. Nicholas Otieno and Hugh McCullum (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005), xv–xxii; 'Jesus Christ', in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, ed. Susan Frank Parsons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 151–70; 'A Biblical Perspective on the Church', *Ecumenical Review* 53, no 1 (January 2001): 44–47.

<sup>10</sup> Kwok Pui-lan makes this same point in her essay, 'Mercy Amba Oduyoye and African Women's Theology', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 20, no. 1 (2004): 7–22.



western than African. They argue persuasively that Oduyoye's essential contribution to global feminist theology was her insistence that African feminist theology must be rooted in African religio-culture. If the liberation project was to be truly African and not itself a 'neo-colonial' imposition, then African culture—that is, religio-culture—had to be taken seriously. Fiedler and Hofmeyer write,

Mercy Amba Oduyoye was informed by the African context regarding what was possible, as well as what was already being done, in Africa. This is why, even though ecumenical bodies admittedly comprised the avenues within which the Circle was conceived, Mercy Amba Oduyoye primed Circle theologians to research and write African feminist theologies *within the realm of religion and African culture*.<sup>11</sup>

In *Daughters of Anowa*, Oduyoye's most significant work from her 'healing' phase, Oduyoye uses Africa's rich oral folktalk traditions to rectify the power imbalance between women and men. Kwok Pui-lan notes that Oduyoye accomplishes this through the questions she asks and the uses she makes of this material. First, Oduyoye asks how folktales, myths, and proverbs actually work to shape the lives of women, taking note of where their effects are liberating or oppressive. Second, Oduyoye asks who benefits from these myths, folktales, and proverbs. Third, Oduyoye encourages women to discard oppressive interpretations embraced by a patriarchal culture and construct 'new patterns of meaning for their lives'. Kwok Pui-lan summarizes the importance of Oduyoye's work on folktalk this way: 'Oduyoye's critique of myths, folktales, and proverbs that shape the communal perception of womanhood is significant, because few feminist scholars worldwide have looked into

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<sup>11</sup> R. N. Fiedler and J. W. Hofmeyer, 'The Conception of the Circle of Concerned African Women: Is It African or Western?' *Acta Theologica* 31, no. 1 (2011): 56; italics added. Bridget Monohan notes the same emphasis in African feminist theology at its beginning in her discussion of the formation of the Circle in, 'Writing, Sharing, Doing: The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians' (BA thesis, Boston College, 2004), 7, <http://hdl.handle.net/2345/386>.

these important resources and developed ways to do exegesis of them.<sup>12</sup> Oduyoye is a masterful exegete of these materials.

## 2. ODUYOYE'S PROJECT

Mercy Amba Oduyoye's fundamental concern is to establish theologically the full humanity and equal status of women and men in Africa. In the third ('healing') stage of her mature work, Oduyoye is not trying to simply replace one oppressive stance, patriarchy, with another, matriarchy. Rather, Oduyoye aims to construct something new, something that will bring healing to both men and women who are victims of patriarchalism.<sup>13</sup> For her voice to be taken seriously in Africa, however, she knows that she needs to work out of her own Akan religio-cultural context.

The two features of Akan religio-culture that appear prominently in Oduyoye's work are (1) community and (2) the primal, single-tiered world view that does not separate the material and spiritual worlds. Oduyoye uses the single-tiered worldview to find a basis for a counter-narrative from which to build what she calls a 'two-winged' understanding of what it means to be human—that is, an approach that needs and honours both women and men.

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<sup>12</sup> Pui-lan, 'Mercy Amba Oduyoye and African Women's Theology', 9.

<sup>13</sup> C.f. Oduyoye's opening address to the Circle's first meeting in 1989 where she argued for a 'two-winged' theology that challenged both men and women to be 'part of the team of mid-wives assisting at the rebirth of African women and the resurrection of the human in Africa', Mercy Amba Oduyoye, 'The Search for a Two-Winged Theology: Women's Participation in the Development of Theology in Africa', in *Talitha, Qumi! Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians*, ed. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro (Ibadan: Daystar, 1990), 47. See also Isabel Apawo Phiri, 'Major Challenges for African Women Theologians in Theological Education (1989–2008)', *International Review of Mission* 98, no. 1 (April 2009): 105–19. Phiri makes the point that one of the Circle's successes has been working with African male theologians to realize the importance of African women theologians 'voices' and who are now including them in the theological conversation in Africa. She notes in particular John Pobee, Simon Maimela, John Mbiti, Tinyiko Maluleke, Laurenti Magesa, and Ogbu Kalu as leaders in this effort. She also notes that in both 2006 and 2008 the *Journal of Constructive Theology* dedicated entire issues to articles on masculinities by African male theologians.

Oduyoye experienced many of the obstacles that African women face under a patriarchal system in her own life. The expectations for what makes a woman whole, embedded within Africa's religio-culture, produced a set of roles—particularly bearing children—that Oduyoye did not meet.<sup>14</sup> This raised the question of how Oduyoye, or any African woman, who by choice or by circumstance did not become a mother, could be considered whole.<sup>15</sup> In a religio-culture in which barrenness is considered a curse, how does a woman argue for her own self-worth and wholeness when the surrounding community (including both Christians and others) sees her as needing to be fixed? Mercy Oduyoye's experience as a married but childless woman brought those questions to the forefront of her thinking and fuelled her project to construct an egalitarian and fully liberated understanding of what it means to be human, created in God's image, and African.

Recalling that Andrew Walls described African theologians writing about their own ontological past as 'handling dynamite',<sup>16</sup> we must acknowledge the difficulties Oduyoye faced as she raised these issues. Much of what is positive in Africa's religio-culture—including both its emphasis on community and its unitive single-tiered perspective—can be used to oppress women (and men) when refracted through a patriarchal lens. Oduyoye's project involves finding in Africa's religio-culture, and in

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<sup>14</sup> Kwok Pui-lan discusses this sensitive issue when she refers to Oduyoye's contribution to John Mbiti's *Festschrift*. See Mercy Amba Oduyoye, 'A Critique of Mbiti's View on Love and Marriage in Africa', in *Religious Plurality in Africa: Essays in Honour of John S. Mbiti*, ed. Jacob K. Olupona and Sulayman S. Nyang (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1993), 360–61; Pui-lan, 'Mercy Amba Oduyoye and African Women's Theology', 7–22.

<sup>15</sup> See here the work of Pashington Obeng, who set his discussion of the constituent parts of what it means to be human in the context of marriage in the Roman Catholic Church in Ghana. Obeng's description of the plight of a childless woman and how she is reckoned in Ghana can be said to accurately reflect Oduyoye's personal experience. Pashington Obeng, *Asante Catholicism: Religious and Cultural Reproduction among the Akan of Ghana* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 83.

<sup>16</sup> Kwame Bediako, 'Types of African Theology', in *Christians in Africa in the 1990s*, ed. Christopher Fyfe and Andrew F. Walls (Edinburgh: Centre of African Studies, 1996), 60.

particular the single-tiered unitive perspective on what it means to be human, the tools necessary to construct a thoroughly African basis for the freedom and equality she yearns for in her own life and for all Africa's 'daughters of Anowa'.<sup>17</sup> In short, Oduyoye will use her Akan identity to formulate a liberative, egalitarian theology of what it means to be fully human.

## **2.1 Oduyoye's Foundational Use of the Single-Tiered African Unitive Perspective on Reality**

Oduyoye draws on religio-culture often, and in a 1979 article she isolates the single-tiered perspective that is foundational for religio-culture when she notes that

a sense of wholeness of the person is manifested in the African attitude to life. Just as there is no separation between the sacred and the secular in communal life, neither is there a separation between the soul and the body in a person. Spiritual needs are as important for the body as bodily needs are for the soul.<sup>18</sup>

By connecting the inseparability of 'sacred' and 'secular' in communal life with the equal inseparability of 'soul' and 'body' in a person Oduyoye prepares the way for her later argument that women (who contribute 'body') and men (who contribute 'spirit') are equally necessary for the creation of new human beings. Oduyoye's essential contribution comes, however, in asking the question, if both men and women contribute ontologically necessary elements in the creation of a new life, why are the resulting male and female children not fully equal? Oduyoye's dual hermeneutic of experience and identity is in effect as she accepts and uses the key role that religio-culture—and their experience as women within that religio-culture—plays in the work of Africa's women theologians. An African woman theologian has no choice but to theologize 'from the vantage point of women's experiences and locations', which for Oduyoye and

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<sup>17</sup> See Section 2.3.2 below for an explanation of who Anowa is and her importance in Oduyoye's work.

<sup>18</sup> Oduyoye, 'Value of African Religious Beliefs', 111.

her friends 'reflect[s] the antecedent religion and culture which continue as Africa's religio-culture' and 'plays a key role in women's theologies'.<sup>19</sup>

In *Introducing African Women's Theology*, Oduyoye continues her argument that religion and culture are mutually interdependent, existing as an inseparable entity. 'Africans', observes Oduyoye, 'live in a spiritual universe. Whatever has an outward appearance also has an inner essence and we have to stay in touch with God from whom we came to inhabit this dimension of reality.'<sup>20</sup> All of life, including both how to understand one's place in this world and how to 'survive and thrive', is formed by this religio-culture, which directs 'the shaping of the moral, social and the political and even, at times, the economic' lives of the people. 'Hence', Oduyoye writes, 'the moral obligations that weigh so heavily on African women are firmly hooked on to beliefs.'<sup>21</sup> Distinguishing this understanding of reality from the western bias of anthropological studies, Oduyoye notes that 'the dualism of the spiritual and the material, in traditional anthropology, [which] assigned the material to what is worldly, and the spiritual to what pertains to our post-mortem salvation' does not apply to 'the holistic anthropology that African women are working on [that] dispenses with this scheme'.<sup>22</sup> In particular, Oduyoye uses this argument to establish that 'just as before God the male-female duality is of no account, so also the spiritual-material scheme is dispensed with by women. Human spirituality is not apart from the body and most emphatically not apart

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<sup>19</sup> Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 9.

<sup>20</sup> Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 25.

<sup>21</sup> Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 25. See also 80, where she writes, 'Because our approach to life in Africa is holistic ... we cannot look at domestic, community, political, and economic structures without encountering religion, and, similarly, culture and religion will enter into our discussion of marriage practices and the political or economic power of women.'

<sup>22</sup> Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 72–73.

from women's bodies.'<sup>23</sup> Hence, the ability of African women theologians to bring to bear a significant critique of African culture from their own feminist perspective is rooted in this African religio-culture.

It should be noted that Oduyoye derives her critique from the underlying single-tiered structure of Akan religio-culture rather than from that religio-culture itself. This is important because Oduyoye is quite aware that much in Akan religio-culture is oppressive to women. In other words, the single-tiered unitive perspective on reality does not itself guarantee equality.<sup>24</sup>

Relying on the interpretive landscape emerging from the single-tiered structure of the world, Oduyoye now uses 'the voice of the ancestor' that holds 'the key to personal and community well-being' to demonstrate that women's voices have at times been denied, muted, or rendered useless by patriarchal influences.<sup>25</sup> While women are expected to uphold the humanizing voice of the ancestors, Oduyoye argues that women have become unrecognizable to their own Akan ancestors by denying the liberative voices emanating from their own religio-culture. Asking women to perform this 'humanizing' role while denying them a voice in the 'politics of family and nation' is akin to Pharaoh demanding that the Israelites make bricks without straw. To make her point, Oduyoye points to the women of the colonial period who too willingly embraced a western standard, writing: 'The Ghanaian "Victorian woman" [i.e. the westernized Ghanaian woman who thought she needed to become 'western' to be a Christian] is a lost person. She bears a name that was approved by the missionaries and then she has

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<sup>23</sup> Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 72–73.

<sup>24</sup> Oduyoye notes that women themselves are party to some of these oppressive practices 'as when women put widows through rites (never mind at this point that it is for the benefit of the soul of the departed spouse)' Mercy Amba Oduyoye, 'Christianity and African Culture', *International Review of Mission* 84, nos. 332–333 (January–April 1995): 80.

<sup>25</sup> Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 25.

her husband's family name, neither of which her ancestors can recognize.<sup>26</sup> In other words, such women cannot hear the liberative voice of the ancestors already present in Akan folktalk. Challenging this state of affairs means challenging 'much that is ingrained in our religio-culture; we need to acknowledge that women are not mere symbols of morality ... they are equally human'.<sup>27</sup>

As already noted, African women theologians must still use this religio-culture.<sup>28</sup> The challenge, however, is to use the gospel to free their religio-culture from the burden of patriarchalism that lies at the root of some of its most oppressive features. Women, Oduyoye argues, will use their experience as women—the hermeneutical principle in feminist theology—as well as appeals to the underlying single-tiered unitive perspective on reality that is foundational to Akan religio-culture to re-interpret what they discover there and use it to liberate women.

Women are developing cultural hermeneutics for the appropriation of Africa's religio-culture, which constitutes a resource for envisioning the will of God and the meaning of women's humanity. Theological messages, we suggest, are also coded into myths, folktales, proverbs, maxims and in ritual practices that are the common heritage of all Africans whatever their religious affiliation.<sup>29</sup>

## **2.2 Africa's Single-Tiered Religio-Culture: Aid to a Specifically African Feminist Critique of Patriarchalism**

We see Oduyoye's fundamental reliance on this single-tiered religio-culture for constructing a fully egalitarian theology when we observe how her work differs from that of western feminists. Oduyoye is similar to liberation, feminist theologians from other parts of the world in her affirmation of the importance of a woman's experience,

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<sup>26</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 107.

<sup>27</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 171.

<sup>28</sup> See FN 17 above.

<sup>29</sup> Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 18.

but she uses her Akan identity, shaped by the single-tiered unitive perspective on reality, to provide categories for thinking through the gospel that are unavailable to her colleagues from other parts of the world. Fully appreciating Oduyoye's project and execution of her theological task requires seeing beyond her use of the hermeneutic of experience to her use of the hermeneutic of identity and the single-tiered religio-culture that informs and shapes that identity.

Fiedler and Hofmeyer quote Brigalia Bam, a South African theologian, recounting an oral presentation that Oduyoye gave at the Pan African Conference, Institute of Women in Religion in 2005.

Mercy made it clear, in her writings and public discourses, that African women's theologies cannot be properly understood unless they are considered from the perspective of both culture and religion. *This was a new stance in theological thinking amongst the women concerned, since many of them tended to write from the perspective of Western feminist theologies.*

Bam thus concluded that 'Mercy was the first African woman theologian to create an African feminist theology'.<sup>30</sup> Fiedler and Hofmeyer present this as evidence that while western feminist theologians (they are thinking specifically of Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Letty Russell) and African feminist theologians voice similar critiques of patriarchy, the critiques themselves originate in some different places. So, for example, while the injustice and poverty experienced by women is so often 'bodily', Oduyoye's access to a single-tiered unitive perspective on reality, and the material-spiritual interpretive landscape which emerges from that perspective, strengthens her ability to make a case for change in the here and now that is distinct from arguments made in the West. The inseparability of body and spirit requires Oduyoye's critique to include a profoundly spiritual component. Her use of the Akan

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<sup>30</sup> Fiedler and Hofmeyer, 'Conception of the Circle of Concerned African Women', 51–52.



ontology of personhood is no add-on to a more central critique, but is itself at the very centre of her critique.

Oduyoye is, of course, aware of her differences with western feminists, and she is critical of some who are apparently unable to escape their own ethnocentrism in reading (or failing to read) the rich pro-woman elements in African folktalk. Nor does she believe it either fair or accurate to assert that African women have always been docile and submissive, since significant examples exist to refute this notion. 'Western women', Oduyoye writes, 'unaware of the mythic foresters that inhabit the African woman's subconscious ... have not been sensitive enough in their ... zeal to speak for women from the Third World' and have used elements from Africa's religio-culture they did not adequately understand to win points for their project while alienating 'the very people they set out to include'.<sup>31</sup> More importantly, women in the West have neither recognized nor appreciated the tools needed by African women to secure their liberation. Oduyoye's tacit assumption is that Africa's underlying unitive perspective is a woman's friend. Further, this underlying perspective, expressed through the traditions, folktales, myths, and proverbs of the people, provides the sources Oduyoye uses in her struggle against oppression and for liberation in Africa. These African sources are of greater use to her than anything imported from the West.

In a context where survival is all-important, Oduyoye is frustrated by a western critique that is simply out of touch and comes across as trivial. She writes, '*African women make relentless efforts to recall, practice, and enhance the dignity found in their traditions. ...* When her Western sister concludes that eating in the kitchen and not with her husband sounds like punishment or indicates her inferiority, she simply shrugs it

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<sup>31</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 86.

off.’<sup>32</sup> Oduyoye cannot help at times seeing western feminists as naive in their emphases, as in the case of inclusive language, which she dismissively refers to as the ‘grammar of sexism’. African women, she argues, are not so gullible as to think of God as male, and they certainly never mistake men for God.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, Oduyoye is keenly aware of how sexism resides at a much deeper level in the language of folktales and proverbs.<sup>34</sup> In her discussion of *Ohia*, who is given the power to understand the language of animals and consequently becomes a very successful farmer, she demonstrates how a folktale ostensibly intended to explain how death came into the world is ‘heard’ as a warning against marrying a ‘bad’ woman. She knows that part of her work is

to examine the language about women used in folktales, seeking to discover what is authentic womanhood—‘personhood’ as experienced by women—in a matrilineal society. In selecting folktales for analysis, I asked only two questions: How do they image women? In what way is that imagery still extant, modified, or in need of transformation?<sup>35</sup>

When discussing proverbs, Oduyoye argues that while there are proverbs that affirm the full interdependent humanity of men and women, in practice they are disregarded.<sup>36</sup> Among Akan boys, for example, she notes that growing up with certain ‘self-creating’ expectations contained within the proverbial corpus, restricts their freedom to become the people God intends. Even if a man grows up wanting to be

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<sup>32</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 88–89; italics added.

<sup>33</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 111. ‘The maleness or femaleness of God is literally immaterial ... Women do not allow such language to affect their relationships with men who obviously are not God.’

<sup>34</sup> Oduyoye makes a point of discussing this deep-rooted sexism in *Daughters of Anowa*, 112.

<sup>35</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 38.

<sup>36</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 56.

different, the proverbial framework works against him.<sup>37</sup> It is this power of language, present in her own Akan religio-culture, that Oduyoye struggles against.

Akan history, however, offers a helpful, liberating precedent that western feminists neglect. In traditional Asante culture the Queen Mother (*Ohemaa*), was the king-maker.<sup>38</sup> Traditional culture made room for women to exercise power as a symmetrical system developed where the *Ohemaa* controlled the female line (which in a matriarchal society is critical) while the king (*Ohene*), ruled over all. Yet in this system the *Ohemaa* is a power behind the throne, to the point that 'for women, the *Ohemaa* was more or less the de facto ruler, the one who sanctioned marriages and ensured that sexual mores were observed'.<sup>39</sup> Westerners missed this important role of women in Asante culture, apparently because they assumed women in Africa had no greater a role to play in society than their European counterparts. So, in the modern system, the role of the *Ohemaa* was eliminated. While this may have suited the Asante men, Oduyoye looks back to this tradition of her own Asante people and sees a leadership role for women. The cultural rules that evolved from the Asante's interaction with a reality where women and men exercised power, derived from Asante spiritual-material religio-culture, gave at least a select few women real significance in the Asante world. Oduyoye's argument, then, is that Asante tradition itself is a resource to be reclaimed. Oduyoye blames 'Westernization' as it came to rule in colonial times for abolishing 'the bi-focal political administration that had given women a measure of autonomy and enabled them to contribute to the general discussion of national issues'. While the

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<sup>37</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 57.

<sup>38</sup> The *Ohemaa* is the queen mother, and in traditional Akan culture was the 'king maker'. The queen mother (not the queen) ruled during times of war when the king was absent. See Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 96.

<sup>39</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 94.

matri-kinship ideology was admittedly already in decline, ‘the coming of Western patriarchy completed the strangulation of matriarchal voices as far as policy making was concerned’.<sup>40</sup>

Having looked at Oduyoye’s understanding of Africa’s religio-culture as it emerges from the single-tiered unitive perspective and its importance for writing a positive, liberating, egalitarian theology that is free from patriarchal oppression, we turn now to the specific sources Oduyoye uses in making her case: the Bible and folktalk, made up of proverbs, myths, and folktales.

### **2.3 Oduyoye’s Two Sources for Accomplishing Her Project: Bible and Folktalk**

In her search for the ‘God-originated definition of womanness’ in a patriarchal system that ‘often forbid[s] questions of this genre’<sup>41</sup> Oduyoye explores and uses material from two primary sources: the Bible and the folktalk of her Akan religio-cultural heritage. Oduyoye demonstrates the almost inseparable continuity between the Bible and Akan folktalk when she recounts that as a student at the Methodist girls’ boarding school in Kumasi she was required to recite a Bible verse in morning assemblies. The book of Proverbs was her favorite, in part because when she and her friends could not remember an actual biblical proverb, she would take an Akan proverb and put it into King James English. She writes,

Proverbs were already a part of our culture and we school girls could easily get away with converting Akan proverbs into King James language and then simply inventing chapter and verse numbers. Many biblical pronouncements that have direct parallels in our traditional corpus of proverbs, such as those that deal with relations in the family, acquire a universal character, which in

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<sup>40</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 96. For example, ‘No women’s names appeared on the colonial chieftaincy lists.’

<sup>41</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 5.

turn is cited to reinforce the traditional socialization of African young people.<sup>42</sup>

In analysing these texts Oduyoye uses a dual hermeneutic/methodology of experience and identity. As a liberation theologian, she uses women's experiences to determine what is authoritative in both Scripture and the folktalk of her Akan religio-culture. As an Akan, the hermeneutic of identity provides her with categories from the Akan religio-cultural landscape (in particular, the woman's *mogya* and the man's *ntoro*), to use in her liberation project. Here I simply want to emphasize that it is Oduyoye's dual hermeneutic that is the key to her ability to write Akan Christian liberation theology.<sup>43</sup> Only as she pursues this double path does Oduyoye's goal, to 'affirm the humanity of all' at no one's expense, become possible for her.<sup>44</sup> Oduyoye knows that the people she wants to influence 'operate entirely outside Western parameters' and embrace their religio-cultural worldview as integral to 'their way of life'.<sup>45</sup> As the anecdote from her school days suggests, however, using this dual hermeneutic is no mere strategy on Oduyoye's part—it is the expression of who she is as an Akan woman.

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<sup>42</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 174. Later she writes, 'Africans, so adept in our culture of orality, have a prodigious memory for what "the Bible says" just as we do for our myths, tales, and proverbs' (190).

<sup>43</sup> We should also note that western feminists tend not to grasp the significance of Oduyoye's dual hermeneutic, leading to no small amount of misunderstanding and some hurt feelings. I have in mind here particularly Carrie Pemberton, who was nonplussed when the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians refused to let her inside. Pemberton is quite clear that Oduyoye is 'the Circle's mother'. At one point she writes, 'The Circle is undertaking a feminist theological project which uses many of the theological tools supplied by Western feminist analysis, but has chosen alliances other than white sisterhood for pragmatic solidarities with men to secure an African future.' Carrie Pemberton, *Circle Thinking: African Women Theologians in Dialogue with the West* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 12. This is at best a superficial reading of Oduyoye, as Pemberton misses the hermeneutic of identity that Oduyoye is using in tandem with the feminist hermeneutic of experience.

<sup>44</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 8.

<sup>45</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 12.

### 2.3.1 The Bible: The Single Most Important Source for Constructing Her Project

Oduyoye understands that Africans ‘identify’ with what they read in Scripture because the stories and events related in Scripture strike a resonant chord with what they have grown up with in Africa’s religio-cultural milieu. She writes that ‘whether read in a village or studied in a university, the Bible is accepted as the source for the articulation of the Christian faith’.<sup>46</sup> Fiedler and Hofmeyer tell us that Oduyoye’s parents played a key role in shaping her high regard for Scripture, as well as her insistence that the Christian theologians of the Circle continue to root their work in Scripture. However, even as Mercy Oduyoye grew up reading the Bible, she saw that not every use of the Bible was liberating to men and women. She learned how to study the Bible as a student, but it appears that it is as a scholar of African folktales, myths and proverbs that Oduyoye developed her interpretive skills.

It is these skills, which Oduyoye developed to find alternative understandings of African texts overgrown with patriarchal meanings not inherent in the texts themselves, that she now applies to her reading of Scripture. Consequently, she objects early on to what she sees as the African church’s ‘biblicist’ approach to the reading and interpreting of Scripture.<sup>47</sup> By ‘biblicist’ she means a too-simple, woodenly literalist reading of the texts that ends up reinforcing a subjugating view of women. Her argument is that instead of critiquing African religio-culture and its dominant patriarchalism, the Bible, which can be a liberating force, has been used to reinforce an oppressive patriarchal system. Oduyoye knew that not every feminist theologian wanted to grant Scripture the place in their theologies that she does. Fiedler and Hofmeyer write that ‘though she has often been exposed to certain feminist movements that denigrate

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<sup>46</sup> Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing*, 51.

<sup>47</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 173–76.

Scripture, Mercy Amba Oduyoye has consistently promoted reverence for the scriptures in Circle writings'.<sup>48</sup>

Nonetheless, Oduyoye believes that her dual hermeneutic of experience and identity produces a better—because more liberating—reading of Scripture than the 'biblicist' approach can offer. She notes that in Africa the Bible functions of an 'oracle' so that a person need only show where 'the Bible says' for an instant solution to any problem. Consequently, a biblical 'theology of folktalk' 'on what God requires of women' has developed in the African church, based largely on the Old Testament and Paul's letters. The problem, as Oduyoye sees it, is not with Scripture so much as with the patriarchal and oppressive interpretations now embedded within the church's theology, helping to reinforce 'the norms of traditional religion and culture'.<sup>49</sup> She writes,

In African churches, it is not unusual to hear reminders of what "the Bible says" about women. African churches, with their many variations, have not produced a body of official dogmatics hewn from the African context; however, they have developed a theology of folktalk on what God requires of women. Instead of promoting a new style of life appropriate to a people who are living with God "who has made all things new," the church in Africa continues to use the Hebrew Scriptures and the Epistles of St. Paul to reinforce the norms of traditional religion and culture. In the same way that the folktalk of Akan proverbs delineates cultural norms for women, so the theology of "the Bible says" defines accepted norms for African Christian women.<sup>50</sup>

This oracular 'the Bible says' approach to finding God's purposes for men and women has, Oduyoye writes, 'had the effect of sacralising the marginalization of women's experience ... [and] it is painful to observe African women whose female

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<sup>48</sup> Fiedler and Hofmeyer, 'Conception of the Circle of Concerned African Women', 47.

<sup>49</sup> In a footnote Oduyoye writes, 'Biblical models of human relationships, which fit well with the African traditional worldview, have been accepted as unchanging norms for all times and all peoples. It is not surprising, then, that anything other than a literal reading of the Bible is unacceptable.' Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 173 f.n. 3.

<sup>50</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 173–74.

ancestors were dynamically involved in every aspect of human life define themselves now in terms of irrelevance and impotence'.<sup>51</sup> As already noted, Oduyoye argues that the mission-founded churches failed to properly understand Akan culture and the role of women to influence their societies through institutions like the *Ohemaa*. Instead, they imposed their own nineteenth-century understanding of the role of women onto an African context that was already susceptible to patriarchalism. Biblical prophecy, Oduyoye argues, must reassert 'its original character as a voice crying in the wilderness, ignored by the powerful and the respectable' and offer a liberative voice to the church.<sup>52</sup> Like a grid placed over the text, patriarchal interpretations of the Bible have hidden liberating texts that would have better reflected the work of God 'who makes all things new'. Oduyoye is not opposing this authoritative 'oracular' use of the Bible in itself; instead she opposes the authority given to patriarchal interpretations of the Bible that oppress women and men. Her argument is for a reading that recovers the Bible's authority ('the Bible says') to 'make all things new' for women and men.

To move her project forward, Oduyoye uses her hermeneutic of identity to point out that Akan religio-culture does not grant 'special priority' to human fathers because 'African religio-cultural presuppositions' mean that 'the father's role is carefully balanced by a mother's counterpart. So, calling God "Father" or using a masculine pronoun in relation to God does not unsettle women in Africa.'<sup>53</sup> Oduyoye also points to the inclusive nature of African languages themselves that, unlike English and gendered European languages, do not assume maleness. Using their own languages

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<sup>51</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 175.

<sup>52</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 176.

<sup>53</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 179.



would, Oduyoye suggests, end ‘any ambiguity in this area by translating what is intended to include both women and men with [the word] humanity’.<sup>54</sup>

Oduyoye encourages people to look to the stories of women in the Bible to find support for women assuming leadership and ministry roles in the church. Oduyoye argues that because women were associated with witchcraft in traditional religions, women seeking to lead in the church were suspected of trying to bring witchcraft into the church. Oduyoye argues that biblical examples give the church an answer for those who ascribe this guilt to women. The Bible, rather than traditional religions, shows women engaging in healing and prophetic ministries.<sup>55</sup> The challenge, then, is to press on by using these biblical examples to further the liberation of both women and men. Analogical continuity indeed provides the vehicle for making this case. In both Scripture and traditional Akan religion, healing and prophetic power is real and has been exercised by women. Oduyoye believes the case is strong that,

If women appropriate both our Christian and African heritages, we can be social commentators on behalf of justice and true religion as well as cultic functionaries. We can be prophets in our churches like Anna, who saw in the baby Jesus the vision of a New World (Lk. 2:36-38), as well as prophets like the *Asemia* and the *Lalonde* who stood for social justice and women’s participation in political decisions.<sup>56</sup>

In so doing, women in the church will refute the objections and calm the fears of those who see women in these roles as ‘attempts to exercise power over others’.<sup>57</sup> Here we see a clear example of Oduyoye using her dual hermeneutic to arrive at a better use of

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<sup>54</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 180–81. She writes, ‘When African theologians use the term “man” in a generic sense, they use words like *Nipa* (in Akan), *Enia* or *Araiye* (Yoruba). All these names are generic, like humanity or humankind’ (181 f.n. 9).

<sup>55</sup> Examples really are legion. There are Shiphrah and Puah, the Israelite mid-wives in Exodus 1, Huldah the prophetess in 2 Kings 22, Deborah the judge in Judges 4–5, Philip the evangelist’s four daughters who prophesied in Acts 21, Priscilla, Paul’s co-worker, and the many women church leaders Paul addresses in Romans 16.

<sup>56</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 192.

<sup>57</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 192.

Scripture by finding analogical categories and examples available to her through her Akan identity and using them to build a theological case for greater freedom for both women and men.

### **2.3.2 Folktalk: Proverbs, Myths, and Folktales**

Oduyoye says the Bible is her most important source for constructing an African theology, but her writings on proverbs, myths, and folktales are far more interesting and insightful than almost anything she has to say on biblical texts. It would not be fair to say that they are more important to Oduyoye than the Bible, but it might be fair to say she finds the myths and folktales more interesting and immediate to her. I believe this is significant in demonstrating the extent to which Oduyoye's Akan identity is critical to her overall work. The more important questions, however, are those of authority and interpretation. I have already noted that Oduyoye uses the dual hermeneutic of experience and identity in her exegesis of Scripture. We will see now that she continues to use this dual hermeneutic to approach Akan myths, proverbs, and folktales. She uses, in other words, a kind of stereoscopic view to bring depth and dimension to her understanding of these 'texts' (whether oral or written). Oduyoye will argue that their authority rests with the ancestors, who are understood to speak through these stories and sayings. Consequently, her objection to the patriarchal bias in their received interpretation is tantamount to a claim that these interpretations misrepresent the intended meanings of the ancestors themselves.

Oduyoye's re-interpretation of these Akan texts demonstrates another instance of analogical continuity for the authority of Scripture. The Akan reverence for the authoritative voice of the ancestors contained in folktalk prepared the way for hearing the authoritative voice of God in Scripture. Accepting the latter, however, has not

eliminated the former.<sup>58</sup> The continuity is not direct in the sense that Scripture has now completely replaced Akan folktalk. Instead, these Akan proverbs, myths, and folktales provide a landing place for the idea of an authoritative Word from God, now located in the Bible.

With regard to the folktales themselves, we note again that Oduyoye locates the authority of Akan folktales in the fact that they pass on the established truths and societal norms of the ancestor ‘elders’. Oduyoye describes how they function:

Akan folktales are generally “why so” and “how come” stories, but very often they introduce a moral at the end with the formula: “That is why the elders say ...” or simply “That is why.” We cannot overestimate the power of folktales as vehicles for the transmission of norms. The verbal images created for us, often as children, acquire the status of holy writ.<sup>59</sup>

Further, Akan folktales contain the explanation of the Akan people for the reality they bump up against in their daily lives, a reality that is both natural and supernatural, defining their responsibilities in a world of spiritual and material cause and effect—or, in Oduyoye’s words, ‘the religious implications of their respective cosmologies’.<sup>60</sup> If she can burrow down to the primal layers of reality to which these myths bear witness and offer an alternative explanation to the androcentric meanings adopted by men for their own power purposes, she will have an entire arsenal of weapons for her project of restoring full humanity to both men and women and bringing society to a way of life equally beneficial to all.

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<sup>58</sup> When I asked my Ghanaian supervisor a question regarding something I had written, he responded with a proverb, which I took to be both authoritative and binding!

<sup>59</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 37.

<sup>60</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 37.

Oduyoye observes that African Religions<sup>61</sup> are revealed religions in the sense that they rely upon ‘intimations’, ‘traditions handed down’, and a whole corpus of proverbs, myths, and folktales. Taken together, these proverbs, myths, and folktales are carriers of ‘the beliefs concerning the existence and role of the ancestors and the spirits of nature, which all converge into a religio-culture that rules and directs life in Africa, and makes lineage and kinship powerful controlling factors in the lives of Africans’.<sup>62</sup> Oduyoye will reject some of Africa’s myths, folktales, and stories—such as the Gabon creation myth that portrays women as created by men—but she does so in favour of a new myth that is still embedded in and grows out of the material-spiritual unitive perspective of Africa. She writes,

We cannot wear beads that suggest we are made by men. Such beads—like the Gabon creation myth in which man made woman out of a piece of wood—are simply impossible to wear; for the person who whittled you into being can make you whatever size he wants or make you disappear altogether. The view of woman as a derivative being is oppressive. It underlies women’s exclusion from power structures and marks the diminution of our full humanity. What we are given in its place is the solicitous care of paternalism, a force that isolates and insulates us, almost to the point of eliminating our presence altogether. Maleness is presumed to be the norm of human beingness.<sup>63</sup>

Using the metaphor of a string of beads, Oduyoye argues instead for a new strand of beads that tells the story of a people, both male and female, whose humanity is fully realized and valued. Oduyoye’s work, along with its power to convince, depends on the unitive perspective of Africa’s single-tiered reality, so it is in this body of literature that she finds additional categories with which to formulate her feminist liberation theology. In other words, without the hermeneutic of identity, Oduyoye’s hermeneutic of

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<sup>61</sup> The term Oduyoye uses rather than African Traditional Religions; elsewhere she will speak of African Primal Religions.

<sup>62</sup> Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology*, 25.

<sup>63</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 213.

experience would be little more than western feminism overlaid with a thin covering of Akan cloth—but not *kente* cloth. *Kente* cloth, the traditional fabric of the Akan, represents the creativity and imagination of Akan women. Oduyoye uses this very physical thing, a beautiful piece of cloth, to represent metaphorically the even greater beauty of a society where full humanity is granted to both male and female. This, however, will require weaving a new version of the *adwini asa*, the name of a particular Kente cloth (and here she puns on the Twi phrase *adwene asa*, which means ‘we have no brains’) in order to create a new order where women and men are seen and treated as equals. By weaving this new *kente* cloth, Akan women (and men) re-create themselves in their God-given dignity. She writes,

I dream of a new Kente cloth, a new tapestry to symbolize the equal value of men and women. With intricate designs of mutual dependence and reciprocity, it has a pattern in which individual strands of thread may be traced, but they cannot be pulled out without destroying the whole. Although we love *adwini asa*, we have continued to weave new patterns. ... Women have set out on a journey to call society back to its divine origin and back to the dignity of the human person. This goal will be reached. And when we waiver or doubt, we should recall Jesus’s story of the persistent widow!<sup>64</sup>

Oduyoye writes, ‘I have come to realize that by looking more critically around us, as well as deeper into our history, we can be motivated and empowered to create structures that obviate all that we have denounced in patriarchy.’<sup>65</sup> Even though many of the African myths she deals with reinforce the idea that women are to put community ahead of their own personal welfare, Oduyoye uses her dual hermeneutic to reinterpret some of these same myths not to reject the nurturing role of women and their importance to the health and well-being of the community but to construct a healthier, liberating, egalitarian community in which women and men will both flourish as God

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<sup>64</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 75–76.

<sup>65</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 8.

has created them to do. Oduyoye's first example is Anowa. Oduyoye finds in the myth of Anowa a strong, woman leader, a 'prophet and priest whose life of daring, suffering, and determination is reflected in the continent of Africa. It is this', she writes, 'that leads me to name Anowa Africa's ancestress'.<sup>66</sup>

We find a second example of Oduyoye's reinterpretation of Akan folktales to undermine its traditional use in her approach to the 'Tale of Ananse'. In this story, used to explain how *Onyankopon* handed over 'control of the human story' to a man who then uses that power to impose a patriarchal order on the Akan community, Oduyoye finds a different lesson. Originally, *Onyankopon* was the owner of all folktales, which meant that *Onyankopon* controlled the stories and hence controlled their meaning and application to people's lives. In the myth of Ananse the spider, the Akan learn how that control passed from God to men (not to humankind generally, which is the result Oduyoye will argue for with her re-interpretation of this myth). Ananse goes to *Onyankopon* and asks to buy his 'stories'. *Onyankopon* tells him that 'the mighty cities of Asante could not afford the price of the stories, much less a poor commoner' like Ananse. Ananse, after finding out that the price is a python, a leopard, and a *mmeoatia* (one of the legendary 'little people of the forest'), insists that he will secure all of these and add his mother, Yaa Nsia, as a bonus. Ananse, however, is unsuccessful until his wife tells him how to trap each of these creatures. Ananse follows his wife's advice

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<sup>66</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 6. In a footnote, Oduyoye notes some of Anowa's story. In Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* (Nairobi: East Africa Publishing House, 1973), a radical epic on Africa, Armah names Anoa (a variant spelling of Anowa) as a mythical woman representing Africa. In this account, Anoa is a prophetess. Armah's epic describes Africans in the Sahara before their flight south from patriarchal ideological encroachments seeping in from the north that brought slavery and Islam. Anoa's people were characterized more by a communal instinct than a 'selfish urge for self-glorification', and more by 'peace than clamor for heroic action. Like Anoa they learned to hunt for food, not for war; not for pleasure but for stopping the aged lion and the wild hog and to keep the hyena at bay.' Armah portrays Anowa as a woman who opposed slavery and the slave trade. She was the epitome of a woman participating fully in what is life-sustaining and life-protecting, someone worthy of being named an ancestress.

until he thinks he doesn't need it any longer. True to his word, Ananse uses his mother's pride in her son's ability to accomplish these near-impossible tasks to lure her into going with him to *Onyankopon*. In exchange for the stories, Ananse handed over a python, leopard, *mmoatia*, and his own mother to *Onyankopon*. Oduyoye writes, 'thus, in this folktale of beginnings, God abdicated centerstage, handing over control of the human story to a commoner who succeeded by his wits'.<sup>67</sup>

Oduyoye notes that men typically use this story to justify using women for their ends. Women, under this interpretation, are to be servants to their husbands or the men in their lives. Oduyoye argues, however, that the story can just as well be interpreted as a warning to women to use their own wits to progress in life with—or, as the case may be, without—the help of men. Oduyoye uses an Akan proverbial saying to indicate that the unspoken moral of the story for girls *should* be: 'That is why mothers say, if you know how to achieve success, go after it yourself, and by all means refuse to be used by others.'<sup>68</sup> This is an example of what Oduyoye means when she discusses using a 'spiral' approach and allowing one myth or proverb to correct another. We will now consider this aspect of her thinking.

Oduyoye employs the image of an upward spiral in which matriarchy and patriarchy participate in a kind of dance to describe what she hopes to accomplish as she applies her dual hermeneutic of experience and identity to exegeting both Scripture and folktalk. Oduyoye argues for a re-interpretation of both in order to return 'parity and justice to human relations', looking for 'the *human* traits that are desirable for building up and maintaining personal (not just male or female) skills in this communal

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<sup>67</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 39.

<sup>68</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 40.

task'.<sup>69</sup> In a passage that seeks to get beyond the limiting constraints of both patriarchy and matriarchy, she bases her conclusion on insights from myths and folktales that are purer because they have not been co-opted by men to enforce male dominance over women. It is possible, she believes, for men and women to empower one another. Oduyoye uses the re-interpretation—or, perhaps better, the finding of truths that have long lain dormant under the androcentric understanding of the 'received tradition'—of myths, folktales and proverbs as one essential means of moving the conversation in a liberative direction. Here we see again the tacit use of her African identity as a theological category on which to build as she returns to those stories which have shaped her. Because these stories speak 'from deep to deep', they are essential; their power comes from their ability to describe the reality of the single-tiered world the Akan deal with day in and day out.

But Oduyoye also uses her feminist hermeneutic—the experience of women, especially poor and oppressed women—to find truth in the tradition. So, 'when the imagery and message of traditional folktalk conflict with contemporary needs of women ... the spiral mode permits us to retrace our steps to seek other myths, folktales, or proverbs to move our quest to a qualitatively different level'.<sup>70</sup> This, of course, is exactly what Oduyoye has done in her re-interpretation of the Ananse folktale, weaving the story together with a liberative proverb to take the folktale itself in a liberative direction.<sup>71</sup> The truths exist and are there to be found—not in every myth, but in the

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<sup>69</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 34.

<sup>70</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 34–35.

<sup>71</sup> Oduyoye insists that women must do the work of re-evaluating language and myths of what makes for *the* ideal women, rejecting that very notion. 'If our bondage to culture means that we have accepted myths of womanhood, knowing full well ourselves that there is no such thing as *the* woman, it is incumbent upon us to review these myths and test all the language that says "It is not good for you." What is not positive imagery of women should die from disuse, or it will continue to hamper our desire to



reality that the myths, taken together, cannot help but describe. Women do not, by their experience, create reality; they experience what is already there that has been captured in this rich oral tradition.

In Oduyoye's handling, folktalk becomes self-correcting. African women theologians know that 'life is movement and being, a continuum of dynamic creative and empowering relationships moving ever upwards'.<sup>72</sup> Oduyoye is aware that in folktales like the story of Ananse the Spider 'women hear and see themselves as they are actually regarded in their culture. The stories told by the Akan in the dim light of the evening fires become operational in a veiled way in their attitudes toward women and things feminine.'<sup>73</sup> Oduyoye understands that folk tales both prescribe and mirror the gender roles within Akan society so that they perform a socializing role for young people growing up in Ghana.<sup>74</sup> Where that socializing leads to oppressive structures and roles for women, Oduyoye uses her 'spiral' methodology to correct (where possible) or reject (when necessary) the traditional interpretations. Oduyoye's great contribution here is reclaiming these materials in much the same way Edwin Smith's blacksmith friend described. Oduyoye is a refashioner (*usemunuzhi*) of folktales, proverbs, and myths. In her hands they become 'iron' that will not be thrown out, but used to fashion something new.<sup>75</sup>

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live as human beings who are female' (*Daughters of Anowa*, 202). She argues, then, for the creation of 'a new language, positive myths, and dynamic icons that will protect the humanity of women as partners in creation and in community' (*Daughters of Anowa*, 202–03)

<sup>72</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 34.

<sup>73</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 40.

<sup>74</sup> 'Among the Akan, the ordinary events of daily life are sprinkled with an appropriate set of proverbs, used for decision-making, counselling, and the offering of benedictions and prayers. Like the collected wisdom of all societies, this wisdom literature plays a crucial role in traditional non-formal education.' Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 37.

<sup>75</sup> See my discussion of the Kasenga blacksmith in Chapter Four.

Oduyoye uses these sources because she must. Her own Akan identity, serving now as a theological category and hermeneutic, requires that she use them. Akan folktales give voice to her Akan identity, and her dual hermeneutical methodology of experience and identity means that her work does not line up simplistically with western feminism. Oduyoye accomplishes a richer, fuller weaving together of the natural and supernatural than the two-tiered approach of the West can rival.<sup>76</sup> To restore to women their God-given humanity and what ought to follow from that, Oduyoye argues that African women need to return to their religio-cultural roots to find the larger context for their lives, one that is purer, richer, and egalitarian. Hints of this purer history appear in folktales, myths, and proverbs and need to be culled and used. 'We need', Oduyoye writes, 'to investigate our roots, our culture, our religion, and we need to acknowledge frankly the patriarchal nature of the axioms that shape traditional ideologies.'<sup>77</sup>

Acknowledging the power of folktalk, Oduyoye argues that women must re-claim these stories in defence of their own full humanity. In so doing, she appeals to a meaning in these tales that pre-dates their co-optation by men. Nothing within them requires that they be read as a male power structure wants them to be read, so Oduyoye argues that here women must assert their own readings as valid.

The daring 'witch' in all women will not die as long as they can hear stories of their power (if only that of nuisance value!). Like the witches and queens of the tales, women can dare to act autonomously or to make demands. But until now, it seems, 'we hear and hear' these tales, 'but do not understand.' Yet to accept a male regime without questioning male portraits of women is to agree to act out a male history rather than God's history and to continue to act out *Anansesem* (man's stories), while we ought to be rereading them

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<sup>76</sup> We see a concrete example of this in Oduyoye's writings on Christology, where she emphasises that within Akan religio-culture Jesus has to be the supernatural *Christus Victor* or he will not make contact with the lives of African women. Oduyoye, 'Christ for African Women', 38.

<sup>77</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 105.

to discover what in them may have been the original *Nyankonsem* (God's stories).<sup>78</sup>

What Oduyoye does with Akan folktales she continues to do with Akan proverbs,<sup>79</sup> challenging interpretations that have had the effect of privileging maleness and denying women their full humanity. We have already seen this in Oduyoye's use of an Akan proverb to reinterpret the story of Ananse the spider.

As Oduyoye discusses the roles women fulfil in African society, she argues that there is no inherent, built-in, or self-evident reason for most of the stratification of gender roles. 'Gender stratification' is societal, and the resulting distortion in 'the quality of human relations' is too often reinforced by proverbs.<sup>80</sup> So, for example, while Oduyoye can hardly overstate the importance of women as mothers and by no means suggests an abdication of this role, she argues that women need to see themselves—and insist that their husbands see them—as more than what any one role, including that of motherhood, could suggest. This is all the more significant because, as Oduyoye points out, what limits women also limits men.

In her project of constructing a theological foundation for the full equality of men and women created in the image of God, Oduyoye uses the dual hermeneutic of her own experience of constricting gender roles arbitrarily assigned by a patriarchal society (particularly those she encounters as a childless woman), and the power of her own African identity to win liberation for African women. With an appreciation of Oduyoye's dual hermeneutic in place, we now move to consider how Oduyoye uses her

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<sup>78</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 54.

<sup>79</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 55–76. In this chapter she draws on the 3,679 proverbs collected by J. G. Christaller in *Twi Mmeseem Mpensa-Ahansia Mmoano: A Collection of Three Thousand and Six Hundred Tshi Proverbs in Use among the Negroes of the Gold Coast Speaking the Asante and Fante Language* (Basel: Basel German Evangelical Missionary Society, 1879).

<sup>80</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 63.

hermeneutic of identity as she joins other Akan scholars in conversation about the best way to understand the nature of human beings

### 3. THE AKAN TRADITIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE NATURE OF HUMANKIND

Akan scholars generally agree that four elements are present in all people, without which they are not human. These encompass both the physical and the spiritual. The first element is the *mogya*, or blood, which is passed on by the mother. The second is the *ntoro*, or spirit, which comes directly from the father. The third, *sunsum*, is also spirit, and it is either a particular instance of *ntoro* or an element that comes directly from *Onyame*. Finally there is the *kra*, sometimes referred to as *okra*, which comes from *Onyame*. The list of scholars who have written on the subject of the Akan understanding of the nature of being human is extensive, and includes: Johannes Christaller, R. S. Rattray, K. A. Busia, S. G. Williamson, J. B. Danquah, John Pobee, K. Gyekye, Pashington Obeng, R. B. Fisher, E. K. Larbi, Opoku Onyinah, R. O. Agyarko, and Charles Aye-Addo.<sup>81</sup> In the following sections I will rely primarily on the work of Busia, Gyekye, Larbi, and Onyinah.

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<sup>81</sup> Christaller defined the key words in his landmark dictionary, J. G. Christaller, *A Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language Called Tshi (Twi, Chee), with a Grammatical Introduction and Appendices on the Geography of the Gold Coast and Other Subjects* (Basel: Basel Evangelical Missionary Society, 1881). See also: R. S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (London: Oxford University Press, 1927); R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1923); K. A. Busia, 'The Ashanti', in *African Worlds: Studies in the Cosmological and Social Values of African People*, ed. Daryll Forde (Oxford: International African Institute, 1954), 190–209; K. A. Busia, *The Position of the Chief in the Modern Political System of Ashanti* (London: Oxford University Press, 1951); Sidney G. Williamson, *Akan Religion and the Christian Faith*, ed. Kwesi A. Dickson, 2nd ed. (London: Frank Cass, 1968); J. B. Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God: A Fragment of Gold Coast Ethics and Religion* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1944); John S. Pobee (editor), *Exploring Afro-Christology* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1992); Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995); Obeng, *Asante Catholicism*; Robert B. Fisher, *West African Religious Traditions: Focus on the Akan of Ghana*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998); Emmanuel Kingsley Larbi, *Pentecostalism: The Eddies of Ghanaian Christianity* (Accra: Blessed, 2001); Opoku Onyinah, 'Akan Witchcraft and the Concept of Exorcism in the Church of Pentecost' (PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 2002); Robert Owusu Agyarko, 'The Sunsum of Onyame: Akan Perspectives on an Ecological Pneumatology'. *Journal of Reformed Theology* 6 (2012): 251–61; Charles Sarpong Aye-Addo, *Akan Christology* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2013).

### 3.1 Humanity as Physical and Spiritual

The first point to emphasize is that humans are physico-spiritual beings. K. A. Busia presents a two-fold ‘theory of procreation’ when he says that in Ashanti a ‘human being is compounded of two principles: the ‘blood’ (*mogya*) which he inherits from the mother, and the other ‘spirit’ (*ntoro*) which is derived from the father’.<sup>82</sup> He writes, ‘Man is both a biological and a spiritual being. This is recognized by the Ashanti in the myth that a human being is formed from the blood (*mogya*) of the mother and the spirit (*ntoro*) of the father. This belief reflects Ashanti social organization’.<sup>83</sup>

From the father a child receives *sunsum* enveloped in *ntoro*, spirit within spirit—‘a twofold gift of the spirit’. It is this twofold gift that ‘determines his character and his individuality’.<sup>84</sup> In Busia’s account, the relationship between the *sunsum* and *ntoro* is complex. A person’s *sunsum* might be called his or her ego, personality, or distinctive character. Unlike the *kra*, it does not survive a person’s death. A third spiritual component, however comes directly from the Supreme Being—the *kra*.<sup>85</sup> Busia uses the account of an ‘old Ashanti elder’ to explain how the three interact with the mother’s *mogya*.

*Sunsum* is that which you take with you to go to the side of the woman and lie with her and then the *Onyankopon*, the Great One, will take his *kra* and bless your union. You give your *sunsum* to your child, not your *kra*. He comes with his own *kra*. As the Supreme Being gives you a *kra*, so he gives your child his *kra*.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Busia, *Position of the Chief*, 1.

<sup>83</sup> Busia was a trained social anthropologist and reflects here the theoretical approach of some anthropologists who understand religion and myth as the projection of societal structures onto the transcendent. Busia, ‘The Ashanti’, 196.

<sup>84</sup> Busia, ‘The Ashanti’, 200.

<sup>85</sup> Regarding the *kra*, Busia writes, ‘A man’s *kra* is a life force, “the small bit of the Creator that lives in every person’s body”. It returns to the Creator when the person dies. It is the Supreme Being that directly gives to a man this spirit or life when he is about to be born, and with it the man’s destiny.’ Busia, ‘The Ashanti’, 197.

<sup>86</sup> Busia, ‘The Ashanti’, 197.

Busia notes, however, than many Ashanti would speak of '*ntoro*' where this elder speaks of '*sunsum*' and concludes that the terms are essentially synonymous. He writes, '*ntoro* is the generic term of which *sunsum* is a specific instance'.<sup>87</sup>

Where Busia sees people as 'tripartite'—*mogya*, *sunsum/ntoro*, and *kra*, Kwame Gyekye believes that the traditional Akan understanding of people is dualistic in that they have just the physical (*honam*) and spiritual elements (*okra*) in their makeup.

Understanding the *sunsum* and *okra* to constitute a spiritual unity, one may say that Akan philosophy maintains a dualistic, not a tripartite, conception of the person: A person is made up of two principal entities or substances, one spiritual (immaterial: *okra*) and the other material (*honam*: body).<sup>88</sup>

Gyekye divides the four elements by their source, with the *mogya* and *ntoro* coming from the parents and both the *okra* and *sunsum* coming from God. The *ntoro* is transmitted through the father's semen and communicates the 'spirit' of the father to the child. The *mogya*, or 'blood', is the physical contribution of the mother and the lone element which is not described as spiritual.<sup>89</sup>

Speaking first about the spiritual element, Gyekye sees the *sunsum* and *okra* as the two elements in a person's spirit, writing that 'the *okra* and *sunsum* are constitutive of a spiritual unity'. He notes, however, that *sunsum*, spirit, resides in both people and

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<sup>87</sup> Busia, 'The Ashanti', 197.

<sup>88</sup> Gyekye, *African Philosophical Thought*, 99. Sidney George Williamson, an early western scholar of the Akan, is one who held to the tripartite understanding of what it means to be human within the social structure of the family, or *abusua*. He points out that Akan society is matrilineal and membership is transmitted through the *mogya* of the mother. While primary another kinship relationship is formed through the *ntoro* transmitted through the semen of the father. Williamson, dependent on Busia's work, regards *ntoro* 'as the generic term' for the more specific *sunsum*, or spirit 'which a child receives from his father and is the source of those distinctive personal gifts in virtue of which he is a personality of individual significance', (Williamson, *Akan Religion and the Christian Faith*, 91–92). Williamson, differing from Gyekye, sees people as tripartite with the *mogya* of the mother, *sunsum (ntoro)* of the father, and from the Supreme Being 'that without which neither *mogya* nor *sunsum* could be effective ... his *okra* (soul). The mark of the Creator, the vitalizing power of the Creator is within him. This is the significance of the proverb, "all men are God's children; none is the earth's child".' Thus Williamson summarises, 'as a living being man is *mogya* (physical being) *sunsum* (individual personality), and *okra* (soul)', Williamson, *Akan Religion and the Christian Faith*, 92.

<sup>89</sup> 'In their conception of the nature of the person the Akans distinguish the *ntoro* and the *mogya* (blood). In contrast to the *sunsum* and *okra*, which definitely are of divine origin, the *ntoro* and the *mogya* are endowed by human from the father of the child. It has been confused with *sunsum*.' Gyekye, *African Philosophical Thought*, 94.

natural objects ‘as their activating principle’. Natural objects do not, on the other hand, have *okra*, while in people ‘*sunsum* is part of the *okra*’.<sup>90</sup> In spite of how some Akan speak, Gyekye wants to maintain a distinction between the body and soul rather than collapsing them into a ‘homogeneous entity’. He writes,

Akan sometimes speak as if the relation between the soul (that is, *okra* plus *sunsum*) and the body is so close that they comprise an indissoluble or indivisible unity, and that, consequently, a person is a homogeneous entity. ... The Akan conception of a person, in my analysis, is dualistic ... although the spiritual component of a person is highly complex.<sup>91</sup>

When Emmanuel Kingsley Larbi discusses the Akan understanding of what it means to be human, he too emphasizes that people are made up of body and soul.<sup>92</sup> Unlike Busia, however, Larbi makes the *mogya* from the mother one of the three elements of the soul. Additionally, Larbi describes the *sunsum* as ‘personality soul’ and the *kra* as ‘life-soul’. As in Busia’s description, the *kra* is a spark of *Nyame* that returns to *Nyame* at a person’s death. The *kra* gives life to the blood of the mother that is passed on to the child. Further, the *kra* cannot leave the body without serious harm or death; it is the *kra* that is attacked by the *sunsum* of witches during the night. As the mother contributes the blood, the father contributes his *ntoro* or *sunsum* to the child, and this represents the child’s individuality. Larbi’s description again reflects the difficulty in making a too sharp distinction between the *sunsum* and *ntoro*. Contra Busia, Larbi says that the *sunsum* lives on in the other world at death. At birth each person’s *kra*—which is pure and in touch with deity—is given a destiny, an *nkrabea* which it must fulfil.<sup>93</sup> If

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<sup>90</sup> Gyekye, *African Philosophical Thought*, 98.

<sup>91</sup> Gyekye, *African Philosophical Thought*, 100–01.

<sup>92</sup> Larbi discusses this in a section of his book that emphasizes the communal importance of this topic, titled, ‘The Akan Concept of Man and the Community’, in *Pentecostalism*.

<sup>93</sup> Robert Fisher comments on this when he writes, ‘before a person is born into the world, he or she stands before *Onyame*, God, who gives the person a destiny to fulfil. The ‘*kra* is a person’s double linking him or her to God. It acts like a guardian spirit or personal god, sometimes offering good advice to keep one out of trouble, sometimes offering bad advice and failing the person’, Fisher, *West African Religious*

it fails to fulfil its destiny, it will be reincarnated until it does. When the *sunsum* and the *kra* are out of balance the *kra* departs and illness results until balance is restored.<sup>94</sup>

Opoku Onyinah argues that the *kra* is linked to the blood-clan and is the vessel of the soul. Again, we can see the inseparable physico-spiritual nature of these Akan descriptives. Onyinah also notes that J. B. Danquah describes the *kra* as a ‘spark of God’. Danquah then comments that ‘there is never any evil stored up in the soul, for the soul is part of the Source [God]’.<sup>95</sup> Danquah also describes how the *okra* appears before God prior to birth to receive his or her *nkrabea*, or purpose, and *hyebea*, destiny.<sup>96</sup> Hence, the *okra* is the source of life and luck for the individual. Onyinah, after discussing the *okra* in light of both Akan and western scholarship, opts to follow Danquah and see the *okra* as ‘the unseen psychic personality behind the activities of a person’.<sup>97</sup> Onyinah understands the *ntoro/sunsum* as the ‘medium of the *sunsum* to manifest itself in the practical world’ and will refer to it as the ‘personality-spirit’.<sup>98</sup> Following Gyekye, Onyinah likens the *sunsum* to one’s personality and quotes the Akan saying that a person with a strong personality will be said to have a ‘heavy or strong’ *sunsum*.<sup>99</sup>

The work of these scholars reflects the difficulty Akan scholars face in describing the Akan understanding of humans’ spiritual and material nature to westerners whose two-tiered universe lacks corresponding conceptual categories. The West can hardly

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*Traditions*, 66. Opoku Onyinah notes that both Harry Sawyerr and S. G. Williamson doubt that the *kra* is capable of giving bad advice (Onyinah, ‘Akan Witchcraft and the Concept of Exorcism’, 37.)

<sup>94</sup> Larbi, *Pentecostalism*, 5–6.

<sup>95</sup> Danquah, *Akan Doctrine of God*, 85.

<sup>96</sup> Onyinah, ‘Akan Witchcraft and the Concept of Exorcism’, 37.

<sup>97</sup> Onyinah, ‘Akan Witchcraft and the Concept of Exorcism’, 39.

<sup>98</sup> Onyinah, ‘Akan Witchcraft and the Concept of Exorcism’, 41.

<sup>99</sup> ‘*ne sunsum yɔ duru, anas yɔ den*’—literally, ‘his spirit is heavy or strong’. Onyinah, ‘Akan Witchcraft and the Concept of Exorcism’, 40.



keep itself from trying to squeeze the Akan understanding into a mould that is essentially one-dimensional.<sup>100</sup> The spiritual and material realities of the Akan human being can too easily be reconfigured as the material plus an invented reality which, with secularization, will wither away. Two implications follow: first, the Akan understanding of what it means to be human is rarely fully appreciated by westerners; second, its explanatory power is often discounted. This observation will become particularly important when we look in greater detail at Mercy Oduyoye's use of the Akan understanding of what it means to be a fully human being.

### 3.2 Maternal and Paternal Bonds Rooted in This Physio-Spiritual Reality

In a careful and nuanced study of the Akan understanding of what it means to be human, Opoku Onyinah draws our attention to the dual set of bonds that are integral to the physico-spiritual make-up of people. In his 2003 dissertation, 'Akan Witchcraft and the Concept of Exorcism in the Church of Pentecost',<sup>101</sup> Onyinah examines the observations of scholars ranging from R. S. Rattray, K. A. Busia, and J. B. Danquah to Kwame Gyekye. Onyinah agrees with Busia, who wrote that, from the Akan understanding of a person's physico-spiritual makeup, 'two sets of bonds, a mother-child bond and a father-child bond, derive ... and determine two sets of groupings and relationships'.<sup>102</sup> Onyinah goes on to examine how the mother's *mogya* and the father's *ntoro* determine a person's two clan affiliations. From the *mogya* (or *bogya*)—that is, blood—of the mother comes a person's *abusua*, his or her matrilineal blood-clan or

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<sup>100</sup> Robert Fisher, a Roman Catholic scholar of the Akan, observes that Akan humanism is not to be confused with western humanism because humanism in the West 'is anti-divine' and has no categories left for integrating 'the spiritual and supernatural'. Fisher, *West African Religious Traditions*, 64. Fisher is clear that African 'humanism' includes as integral to what it means to be human both the spiritual and the material, even if in the West 'humanism' either discards the spiritual or retains it as optional.

<sup>101</sup> Onyinah, 'Akan Witchcraft and the Concept of Exorcism'.

<sup>102</sup> Busia, 'The Ashanti', 196.

family. The *ntoro* (or *bosom*), derived from the father through his semen, determines the patrilineal spirit-clan of the person. Consequently, ‘the Akan see themselves in both the matrilineal blood-clan (*abusua*) and the patrilineal spirit-clan (*ntoro*)’.<sup>103</sup> What this means is that people have a definite place in two clans, or a dual family system. The ‘*abusua*, the matrilineal blood-clan, stresses the importance of the mother’, so when a person suffers either physically or materially the *abusua*—the lineal clan descended from the mother—is expected to find out why and remedy the situation. However, physical remedy through the matrilineal clan is never the whole story. ‘Psychological balance’ is restored through the parallel *ntoro/sunsum* of the patrilineal spirit-clan.<sup>104</sup>

Busia’s early research established that just as every Ashanti belongs to a matrilineal clan, so every Ashanti belongs to an *ntoro* group. *Ntoro* groups consist of people who share the same spirit; it is a ‘spirit-washing or cleansing group’.<sup>105</sup> Every person belongs then to both a clan, determined by the mother’s *mogya*, and an ‘*ntoro* group’ from the father. The single-tiered unitive perspective of the Akan world leads quite naturally to the Ashanti belief, as Busia tells it, ‘that a child cannot thrive if his father’s *sunsum* is alienated, and a priest sometimes says of a sick child that he is ill because his father’s *sunsum* is aggrieved’.<sup>106</sup> In another place, Busia says that ‘a man’s *sunsum* is a child of his *ntoro*; and all who belong to the same *ntoro* are believed to have similar *sunsum*. Hence it can be rightly said that a man transmits his *ntoro* to his children’.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Onyinah, ‘Akan Witchcraft and the Concept of Exorcism’, 36.

<sup>104</sup> Onyinah, ‘Akan Witchcraft and the Concept of Exorcism’, 36.

<sup>105</sup> Busia, ‘The Ashanti’, 197.

<sup>106</sup> Busia, ‘The Ashanti’, 197.

<sup>107</sup> Busia, ‘The Ashanti’, 198.

Based on research conducted in the early 1940s Busia notes that people have largely forgotten, through lack of practicing the rites surrounding *ntoro*, the names of the *ntoro* groups and which one they belong to, most being unable to answer the question, ‘What *ntoro* do you wash?’ Some scholars argue there are seven *ntoro* groups in total while Danquah lists twelve principal groups.<sup>108</sup> A spiritual connection can be traced through the *ntoro* passed down by the father to the idea that the *ntoro* groups themselves are under the aegis of a god (*bosom*), which is itself, in Busia’s understanding, a child of the Supreme Being. Hence the spirit of the Supreme God, shared with the *bosom* (god), is passed to the *ntoro* through their association with rivers, lakes, and seas in which the god is thought to dwell, making the *sunsum* of the man a participant in the *ntoro*. Consequently, all spiritual power ultimately derives from the Supreme Being. Busia writes, ‘as it is the father who is the immediate transmitter of his son’s *sunsum* from the *ntoro*, the spiritual bond between father and son is immediate and close’.<sup>109</sup> These spiritual gifts passed from father to child defines ‘[their] place in the universe, linking [them] with the world of nature and of man. This is what the Ashanti mean when they declare: “All men are children of the Supreme Being, no-one is child of the earth (*Nnipa nyina ye Onyame mma, obi nye asase ba*).”’<sup>110</sup>

Keeping this two-clan association of the Akan in mind will help us consider Oduyoye’s use of the physico-spiritual nature of people to establish the full and equal humanity of men and women.

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<sup>108</sup> Busia, ‘The Ashanti’, 198.

<sup>109</sup> Busia, ‘The Ashanti’, 198. Danquah adds that each *ntoro* group was characterized by certain personality traits. Different taboos were also associated with different groups as were particular surnames. At one time different *ntoro* groups were distinguished by the way they greeted each other.

<sup>110</sup> Busia, ‘The Ashanti’, 199–200.

### 3.3 The Physico-Spiritual Nature of People in Spiritual Warfare

I have already noted that Emmanuel Kingsley Larbi discusses the Akan understanding of what it means to be human in a section entitled, 'The Akan Concept of Man and the Community'.<sup>111</sup> Larbi's interest in the physico-spiritual makeup of the individual is aimed at understanding how the community can protect itself against witches, charmers, enchanters, and sorcerers who seek to tilt the balance of cosmic powers against both the community and individuals. Larbi calls this 'tilting of cosmic power' for the benefit of either the individual or community 'maintaining the cosmological balance'.<sup>112</sup> Larbi therefore uses the body-soul unity of people as understood in the traditional Akan world to locate exactly where the struggle takes place. Like a doctor who must know his or her anatomy by heart, Larbi wants to know the physico-spiritual 'body' of both individuals and the community. Only then will he, as a pastor, be able to engage effectively in the sort of cosmic battles that will maintain the 'cosmological balance' and so fulfil people's aspirations for a full life.<sup>113</sup> Larbi's ultimate interest, then, is power. In order to work for the good of both individuals and the community, Larbi wants to know who the spiritual forces are and how they attack; he also wants to understand the physico-spiritual makeup of people in order to know ahead of time where they are most

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<sup>111</sup> Larbi, *Pentecostalism*.

<sup>112</sup> Larbi, *Pentecostalism*, 7. Larbi writes, 'To the Akan, just like other African peoples, whatever happens to the human being has a religious interpretation. To them, behind the physical is the spiritual, behind the seen is the unseen. Every event here on earth is traceable to a supernatural source in the spirit realm. From the same source, therefore, lies the ultimate succour.' Larbi, *Pentecostalism*, 8.

<sup>113</sup> In *West African Religious Traditions*, Robert Fisher, following John Mbiti, notes that people cannot leave their community without losing everything. Fisher agrees with Mbiti's reframing of Descartes: 'I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am'. He writes, 'Africans see themselves belonging to a community, which for them is central, even more important than the individual. Every other creature exists for the community. The content of the dance, the drumming, the myth, the folktale, the proverb, and other rituals and artefacts revolves around the human being in community, whether family, lineage, village, clan or ethnic group, living or living-dead' (64).

susceptible to attack and how then to protect them. In other words, his concern is eminently practical, with immediate real-life consequences.<sup>114</sup>

Like Larbi, Onyinah is concerned with power, specifically as it relates to overcoming the evil of witchcraft. Onyinah places more emphasis on the communities an Akan participates in, the matrilineal blood-clan (*abusua*) of the mother and the patrilineal spirit-clan (*ntoro*) of the father, but he is in accord with regard to people's practical need to gain spiritual power over forces working against them. This is a question that must be addressed, and both Larbi and Onyinah use their religio-cultural understanding of what it means to be human in a community to provide an answer.

Larbi and Onyinah's work prepares us to hear Oduyoye's voice, particularly as she asks the church to refuse to put women who practice spiritual gifts of prophecy and healing on the outside with witches and diviners, but to instead embrace their gifts for the good of the church.

#### **4. PERSONHOOD AND COMMUNITY AS INTEGRAL TO BEING HUMAN AMONG THE AKAN**

Integral to understanding what it means to be fully human in the Akan context, besides the issues already discussed dealing with the mother's *mogya* and the father's *ntoro*, and hinted at in what I have already said about the matrilineal blood-clan (*abusua*) and patrilineal spirit-clan, is the individual's relationship to the community. John Pobee's

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<sup>114</sup> Robert Owusu Agyarko uses the idea of *sunsum* to create 'an indigenous African ecological theology that will stress the ontological relatedness of humans and the natural environment'. Robert Owusu Agyarko 'The *Sunsum* of *Onyame*: Akan Perspectives on an Ecological Pneumatology', *Journal of Reformed Theology* 6 (2012): 252. Agyarko equates the *sunsum* with God's spirit who, emanating from him and becoming a part of all creation, now serves as the foundation for a unified understanding of the world such that people should care for all of creation. I understand Agyarko to be following Bediako's advice and finding a basis for theology using the categories available to him in his Akan identity. Clearly we see here as well a case of analogical continuity where the Akan understanding of *sunsum* presents Agyarko with a 'landing place' for his understanding of the Holy Spirit. There are problems to his idea which he readily admits, but his ideas are both original and demonstrate the possibilities that exist as African scholars work out of the interpretive landscape of their religio-cultural context.

description of the individual's sense of self being tied to his or her understanding of place in the community is worth noting here: 'Akan man's theory of existence is *cognatus ergo sum* – I am related by blood, therefore I exist.'<sup>115</sup>

Emmanuel Lartey has done extensive work on this issue from his perspective as a theologian and pastoral counselor.<sup>116</sup> He argues that within the African context (and while he is himself a Ghanaian, he is generalizing here to the broader African context) knowledge is acquired through the interaction of the personal, 'through intuition', and the communal – the latter specifically coming 'through participation in ritual, symbol, ceremony and rhythm.' It is rituals, Lartey argues, that 'foster and enhance harmonious relations between humans and the unseen world of ancestors, gods and spirits.'<sup>117</sup> Consequently, for healing to take place attention must always focus on 'the relationship existing between persons and among groups,' because the individual's 'intrinsic worth is to be found in the network of spiritual, familial and inter-generational bonds within which they are embedded.'<sup>118</sup>

Echoing what I have already said about the inseparability of the spiritual and material, Lartey notes that religion is so embedded in the life of Africans that 'many African languages do not have a specific word for "religion."<sup>119</sup> Religion is integral to

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<sup>115</sup> Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 111. This echoes John Mbiti's well known, 'I am because we are.'

<sup>116</sup> See Emmanuel Y. Lartey, *Pastoral Counseling in Inter-Cultural Perspective: A Study of Some African and Anglo-American Views on Human Existence and Counseling*, (Oxford: Peter Lang, 1987), *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World*, (Peterborough: Epworth, 2006), *In Living Colour : An Intercultural Approach to Pastoral Care and Counselling*, (London: Cassell, 1997), *Postcolonializing God: New Perspectives on Pastoral and Practical Theology*, (London: SCM Press, 2013), *Pastoral Care and Counseling: Redefining the Paradigms*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004).

<sup>117</sup> Lartey, *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World*, 63.

<sup>118</sup> Lartey, *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World*, 63.

<sup>119</sup> Lartey, *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World*, 63-64.

life as a whole so that the sacred and secular ‘cohere strongly without contradiction or confusion.’<sup>120</sup>

Sickness and misfortune then are never purely individual experiences to be dealt with privately. The community must also be involved. Opoku Onyinah is helpful here as well when he reminds us, in a section on sin and evil, that the Akan do not put the blame for sin and evil on one demonic figure, like Satan. Rather, ‘Evil occurs when there is *mmusuo*. *Mmusuo* is anything (taboo or sin) which is done contrary to the law of the land, God, the gods, ancestors, community or one’s neighbor.’<sup>121</sup> Further, he notes that the Akan distinguish between private sins that do not appear to affect the community or the gods, and those which do. For the latter, considered by far the more serious, the Akan engage in *mmusuo yie*, rituals intended to ‘propitiate the gods or the ancestors and ask for forgiveness of sins for the offender.’<sup>122</sup> Failure to perform this ritual can, it is feared, result in further suffering to the clan, others in the family, or to the individual. Onyinah agrees with Pobee here that the Akan see evil resulting from evil forces, identified by Pobee as *Sasabonsem* or *ayen* (witchcraft) so that ‘the principal evil is attributed to witches.’<sup>123</sup>

Lartey reminds us of the Akan cosmos that is ‘inhabited and animated by numerous unseen forces, spirits and gods, among which are the ancestral spirits’ all of whom ‘have a crucial relationship’ with both individuals and their communities for either good or ill.<sup>124</sup> People can learn how to manipulate these unseen powers. Onyinah describes at length the Akan understanding of ‘witches’, ‘wizards’, and others

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<sup>120</sup> Lartey, *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World*, 64.

<sup>121</sup> Onyinah, *Akan Witchcraft and the Concept of Exorcism in the Church of Pentecost*, 64.

<sup>122</sup> Onyinah, *Akan Witchcraft and the Concept of Exorcism in the Church of Pentecost*, 65.

<sup>123</sup> Pobee, *Towards an African Theology*, 100.

<sup>124</sup> Lartey, *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World*, 64.

possessed by ‘spirits.’ Onyinah discusses the difference between witchcraft and spirit possession. The former cooperate with the supernatural powers and are said to be in a kind of marriage with them, while the latter are taken over by the spirit and simply act as vehicles which, once used, are vacated. The former, witches, are ‘socially abhorred and despised in society’ while the latter are ‘well respected’. He notes,

This stems from the notion that the functions of those who are possessed by the gods are thought to help the community by the giving of divination and the knowledge of herbal medicines. Thus while a spirit-possession phenomenon is a public affair, witchcraft is a concealed (or nocturnal) activity.<sup>125</sup>

Witches and wizards are perceived as attacking the *okra* of an individual because that is the part of a person which reacts to sin and grief. ‘If a person, dogged by his/her conscience, appears lifeless, it may be said of the person that the soul is sad, or disturbed.’<sup>126</sup> Onyinah treats here the soul as equivalent to the *okra* and argues that the Akan believe the *okra* is the focus of witchcraft. When misfortune strikes, however, it is the responsibility of the person’s matrilineal blood-clan, or *abusua*, to find the cause and deal with it in order to restore the person to his or her family.

It is in the context of discussing the spirit forces within the Akan cosmos that Onyinah describes how fetishes, or *asuman*, are used for communal protection – for marriage and family, business, protecting against witchcraft, even for football.<sup>127</sup> He notes too that the *mmoatia*, dwarfs or faeries, ethereal beings that ‘possess human beings to express their wishes’<sup>128</sup> are considered by some to be manifestations of the *abosom* themselves who then use human intermediaries to exercise their power, by, for

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<sup>125</sup> Onyinah, *Akan Witchcraft and the Concept of Exorcism in the Church of Pentecost*, 70.

<sup>126</sup> Onyinah, *Akan Witchcraft and the Concept of Exorcism in the Church of Pentecost*, 37-38.

<sup>127</sup> Onyinah, *Akan Witchcraft and the Concept of Exorcism in the Church of Pentecost*, 49.

<sup>128</sup> Onyinah, *Akan Witchcraft and the Concept of Exorcism in the Church of Pentecost*, 54.



example, ‘passing their herbal knowledge on to priests and herbalists.’<sup>129</sup> This all takes place in the context of family, clan and community. So, in the section on ‘Spirit Possession and Worship’ he speaks of people coming under the protection or entering into a covenant relationship with a god through its *akomfo* or priest. He writes, ‘This act of covenant making can be done at the levels of a clan, village, family or individual. Clients may also request *akomfo* to invoke the vengeance and wrath of the *abosom* upon people who have offended them.’<sup>130</sup>

Onyinah again would agree with Lartey who asserts that for ‘human wellbeing and flourishing there has to be harmony throughout the cosmos. The ancestors as intermediaries between the seen and unseen forces of creation are arbiters of this harmony.’<sup>131</sup> While noting, as I have above, that the ancestors are generally of greater import to the Akan than the *abosom*, Onyinah qualifies this by saying that behind the directives of the ancestors, and their veneration, is the influence of the *abosom*, since ‘most of the traditions set down by the ancestors were done at the instructions of the *abosom*.’<sup>132</sup> Indeed, Onyinah ties the origins of the clans to the *abosom*.<sup>133</sup> All of this points to the inconceivability of people in this context seeing themselves outside of their relationship to the community. Lartey summarizes well the situation when he writes,

A holistic and synthetic view of life prevails. The different aspects of human, social and spiritual life are connected and interpenetrate. There is a

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<sup>129</sup> Onyinah, *Akan Witchcraft and the Concept of Exorcism in the Church of Pentecost*, 55.

<sup>130</sup> Onyinah, *Akan Witchcraft and the Concept of Exorcism in the Church of Pentecost*, 58.

<sup>131</sup> Lartey, *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World*, 64.

<sup>132</sup> Onyinah, *Akan Witchcraft and the Concept of Exorcism in the Church of Pentecost*, 62.

<sup>133</sup> He relies on the research of Meyerowitz for this assertion. See Onyinah, *Akan Witchcraft and the Concept of Exorcism in the Church of Pentecost*, 63, footnote 179, where he discusses Meyerowitz’s research. Eva L. R. Meyerowitz, *The Akan of Ghana: Their Ancient Beliefs*, (London, Faber and Faber, 1958).

communal view of life that emphasizes a sense of belonging, rather than an individualistic one that values aloneness.<sup>134</sup>

The very real challenge of helping Christians in Ghana deal with the cosmos they understand themselves to inhabit means that individuals cannot be separated from their community – to do so is cruel, a fact not sufficiently realized, in Onyinah’s opinion, by the colonial missionaries on the one hand and the neo-Pentecostals on the other (many of whom were influenced by North American Pentecostalism and its ‘prosperity gospel’). So Onyinah writes, ‘the quest for wholeness (e.g. prosperity, dignity, health, fertility and security) has its basis in the Akan culture; but within the culture, such desire was to enable one to support the extended family in order to be raised to the status of an ancestor (after death).’<sup>135</sup>

## **5. MERCY ODUYOYE AND THE RELIGIO-CULTURAL ARGUMENT FROM IDENTITY: THE WOMAN’S BLOOD, THE MAN’S NTORO AS BASIS FOR FULL EQUALITY BETWEEN THE SEXES**

The Akan scholars we considered above have all used the Akan physico-spiritual understanding of what it means to be human as a theological category for their own purposes. Busia and Gyekye agreed on the four constituent parts that comprise every human being, but differed on exactly how the parts fit together—are humans tripartite or dualistic? More importantly, both Busia and Gyekye describe people within the context of the single-tiered structure of the Akan cosmos as both physical and spiritual in their being. Larbi and Onyinah use this physico-spiritual anthropology to better understand the nature of power encounters facing Christians and the church in their struggle against witches, charmers, enchanters, and sorcerers.

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<sup>134</sup> Lartey, *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World*, 64.

<sup>135</sup> Onyinah, *Akan Witchcraft and the Concept of Exorcism in the Church of Pentecost*, 299.

When we come to Oduyoye's use of the Akan understanding of the person, we see that her dual hermeneutic opens the way for her to go beyond the descriptive work of Busia and Gyekye and beyond the existential application of Larbi and Onyinah. Oduyoye uses the *mogya/ntoro* duality to establish a theological basis for the full equality of women and men rooted in the very essence of their being. In so doing, Oduyoye constructs a logical and coherent argument rooted in a category drawn from her Akan identity to further her feminist, liberation project. Oduyoye's dual hermeneutical methodology—experience and identity—opens up theological possibilities unavailable in the West.

In *Daughters of Anowa*, Oduyoye closely examines the basis for the roles of wife and mother that are so critical to a woman's place in her Akan and Yoruba cultures. In particular, she wonders how it is that women, who do most of the heavy lifting in the birth and raising of children, are not seen more clearly as at least equal in the home. How is it that men still retain the higher status? Since a matrilineal society (in her case the Akan) gives great importance to the mother, what is left for the father to contribute? The answer is the 'spiritual' element.

How ... does a matrilineal society such as the Akan locate the male principle? If the mother is blood, what is the father? If the mother gives political status and inheritance, what does the father confer? ... Traditionally, the Akan located fatherhood in *ntoro*, the spiritual principle associated with fatherhood.<sup>136</sup>

Further, traditional Akan thinking lodges discipline in the *ntoro*, and in so doing embeds male domination and female submission in the essential being of the human person. 'Femaleness' Oduyoye writes, 'is therefore subject to the spirit of discipline and conditioned to accept male domination as the norm of societal life.' Locating power in the spiritual element of the male *ntoro* 'places a double yoke on mothers' because they

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<sup>136</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 114–15.

must not only submit to the discipline of their fathers and husbands but also pass the understanding of power on to their children. This double yoke ‘is of utmost importance for a wife [in order] to be on good terms with her husband and with her affinal group (his family) as they can enable her or prevent her from fulfilling her duties to her ancestors’.<sup>137</sup>

Oduyoye insists, however, that the spiritual element coming through the father’s *ntoro* has a counterpart in the *mogya* or blood of the mother. She emphasizes the essential importance of blood, describing it as ‘imbued with meaning for one’s being’, a meaning that is both ‘physiological’ and ‘theological’. She writes, ‘Sustaining the body, [blood] is the crucial substance of a human being. In pre-colonial days, human sacrifices were understood in religious terms: one life was given up in order to attain more life, either here or in the hereafter.’<sup>138</sup> We see the importance of Oduyoye’s hermeneutic of identity as she continues to discuss the mother’s blood and the taboos surrounding it within Akan culture. Blood holds the community together, past, present and future. In traditional Akan culture, the blood of a woman—particularly a woman of child-bearing age—carries with it the hope of a new generation as well as the continuation of the community through incarnation of the ancestors.<sup>139</sup> Further, the menstruating woman is understood to be a ‘symbol’ of a person offering an atoning sacrifice, where she is herself the offering in the discharge of menstrual blood. This is the reason a menstruating woman is considered taboo—the power in her blood is feared because

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<sup>137</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 115.

<sup>138</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 115.

<sup>139</sup> In a footnote, Oduyoye tells the story of an ‘encounter with a maternal grandaunt, Maame Akosua Adae. ... I had reached 21 years and had no marriage plans, which shocked my grand-aunt. As I left, she said, “My grandchild, I hope you know that with every menstrual period you are signifying that you refuse to give life to the ancestors.”’ Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 119.

she is surrounded by the spirits to whom she is being offered; she must be avoided by mere mortals and she herself must avoid the company of others. Women of child-bearing age are both the symbols and the source of continuity of the human community.<sup>140</sup>

Oduyoye also notes that pre-menstrual girls and post-menstrual women could go to war because if they died, they died as individuals and not as ‘potential sources of human life’.<sup>141</sup> However, neither did they ‘have any menstrual “power,” which could render impotent charms, talismans, and other spiritual sources’.<sup>142</sup> The power of the *brafo* (a menstruating woman) is that she can annul the power of talismanic charms: ‘such a woman renders a man vulnerable to evil spirits and annuls all other powers’.<sup>143</sup>

Oduyoye describes the world that has shaped her identity and finds in its single-tiered interpretive landscape a basis for establishing blood as a spiritually potent counterpart to the male *ntoro*. Neither Busia, Gyekye, Danquah, Larbi, nor Onyinah do this, being content to make the *mogya* of the mother the physical element in the human ontology. Oduyoye, by pointing to the taboos surrounding menstrual blood and the way it is both honoured and feared, demonstrates the both/and of the single-tiered unitive perspective on reality which underlies the Akan identity she is using to build her egalitarian case. Blood is sacred, blood is taboo—but, for the same reason, it has the power to communicate life and death.

This immediately raises ethical questions. According to Oduyoye, because in traditional Akan culture

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<sup>140</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 116. It is worth noting here that Oduyoye considers the ‘blood’ spiritually significant, reminding us that Larbi described the *mogya* as bearing the *kra* such that the *kra* gives life to the blood of the mother that is passed on to the child. Opoku Onyinah links the *kra* to the matrilineal blood-clan making it the vessel of the soul. However, as we shall see, Oduyoye goes further in describing the spiritual power of the woman’s blood.

<sup>141</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 117.

<sup>142</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 116.

<sup>143</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 119.

we hold life to be sacred (related to the divine), people may voluntarily give themselves up so that more life may be created, assured, or lived at better levels. Yet, no one has the right to shed another person's blood or to sacrifice an unwilling person. The blood from such a sacrifice spells death, not life.<sup>144</sup>

Oduyoye recognizes that even for Akan Christians, the articulation of reality found in Akan traditional religion 'undergirds and permeates all we Africans undertake—being born, healing, worshipping, living, dying'.<sup>145</sup> Of course, Oduyoye not only recognizes the physico-spiritual realities of her own Akan identity but uses them to argue her case. Oduyoye's concern is to establish a basis for the full humanity of women, and she finds it in the Akan understanding that the physico-spiritual being of men and women needs the contribution of men (*ntoro* through the semen) and women (*mogya* through the blood that is divinely imbued with power) equally, for life cannot come into being without the presence of both. The inseparable influence of traditional customs on current practices rooted in the African unitive understanding of reality thus gives Oduyoye a basis for the liberation she seeks in the primal African understanding of what it means to be human. Two equally powerful material/spiritual forces—a woman's *mogya* and a man's *ntoro*—form a solid Akan basis for equality.

## 6. CONCLUSION

I have argued in this chapter that Mercy Amba Oduyoye's theological writings emerge from her use of the dual hermeneutic of experience and identity as she applies them to her reading of the Bible and the myths, proverbs and folktales of her Akan religio-culture. Further, I have argued that the hermeneutic of identity has carried most of the theological weight in her project to establish the full and equal status of men and

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<sup>144</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 119.

<sup>145</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 120.

women. I have also suggested in passing that both the dual hermeneutic and the dominance of the hermeneutic of identity separate Oduyoye from western feminist methodology, leading some western feminists (most notably Carrie Pemberton) to fall short of fully grasping Oduyoye's argument. The power of Oduyoye's exposition of Scripture and the folktalk of her Akan religio-culture originates in the fact that her own identity has been shaped by the single-tiered unitive perspective and the resulting Akan interpretive landscape in which she grew up. Her discussion of the inherent physico-spiritual power residing in the very beings of both men and women is possible from the perspective of a worldview in which the spiritual and material are one reality.

Oduyoye argues that our understanding of what it means to be human must mirror a new vision of the earth as a home for a single human race, interconnected and of equal value. By using the physico-spiritual understanding of what it means to be human, rooted in the woman's *mogya* and the man's *ntoro*, Oduyoye has found a basis in the Akan single-tiered unitive perspective on reality for the human connectedness she seeks. Mercy Amba Oduyoye's theological work is thus a significant contribution to this project. That being said, several observations are in order.

First, Oduyoye's readings of the folktales, proverbs, and myths of her own Akan religio-culture generally appear more nuanced and original than her treatment of the Bible. Where, for example, she is able to find a kind of power equivalency between *mogya* and *ntoro* in African myth, she does not find the 'suitable helper' in the Adam and Eve story of equal help because she does not read that text with the same attention to what is there—a side by side egalitarian partnering that she gives to the Akan myth. Likewise, she appears to dismiss Paul, especially what he says about women, far too quickly by adopting the worst possible interpretation of his meaning. While Oduyoye is not a biblical scholar by training, but a self-described dogmatist, her exegetical work

is at times very good. I believe, however, that her higher-critical lenses have unnecessarily deprived her of much helpful material available in Scripture.

Second, and I believe this to be a weakness in Oduyoye's work, she has not brought together her reading of Scripture and Akan folktalk at the deepest level where analogical continuity would have strengthened her argument and helped her escape the limitations of her own higher-critical approach to Scripture. There is a certain irony in the fact that while she has argued strenuously against the colonial missionary emphasis on 'the Bible says', she has not similarly freed herself from an approach to Scripture firmly rooted in the post-Enlightenment emphasis on autonomous human reason. And, as I have already suggested, she deprived herself of a tool (analogical continuity) rooted in her own Akan identity that could have opened numerous passages in Scripture to support her project. Consequently, she has needlessly distanced herself from many potential allies.

Finally, however, we must recognize Oduyoye's use of a dual hermeneutic based on experience and identity as a major step forward in feminist theology. Not only does it result in a more nuanced, and—from my perspective—more interesting understanding of her sources, it also produces an African and Christian theology which emerges from Akan religio-culture, precisely what Kwame Bediako promoted. Oduyoye constructs an egalitarian theology using an understanding of the constituent parts needed to be human that is shared by scholars seeking to construct a patriarchal, or merely complementarian, understanding of what it means to be male and female. In this way, Oduyoye's work demands to be taken seriously by colleagues not in sympathy with her overall project. In my final chapter I will begin to pull together the various strands of my argument in what I trust will have the appearance of a piece of quality *kente* cloth.



## Chapter Seven

### Conclusion

#### 1. THE ARGUMENT

My research centres on my observation that Akan scholars, across disciplines and theological positions, think and write using what I have called the single-tiered unitive perspective on reality. Two questions emerged from this observation. First, how did these scholars use this perspective to articulate their understanding of the Gospel—and, by extension, could the single-tiered perspective provide a hermeneutical key for understanding their work? Second, in what ways might their work contribute to the global Christian theological conversation? In particular, I asked how this Akan unitive perspective might offer a tool for helping the church better understand, if not contribute to resolving, the theological fact-faith divide that Lesslie Newbigin points out as characteristic of the West.

I believe my research demonstrates that the single-tiered unitive perspective does in fact offer an interpretive key for understanding the work of the Akan scholars I researched. Further, I believe my research demonstrates that this single-tiered unitive perspective on reality produces theologies that challenge western thinkers to examine how the disenchanting tendencies of a two-tiered, post-Enlightenment understanding of the world have cast a shadow over their ability to see, and reflect in their own work a view of reality, also seen in the Bible, which holds together the material and the spiritual, the seen and the unseen. I do not call into question the necessity of reason; I do suggest however that reason always starts its work from basic assertions on the nature of reality.

My research highlights these Akan scholars' observation that the single-tiered understanding of reality indigenous to their own culture and communities largely

corresponds with the biblical perspective on the cosmos. It also takes note of these scholars' recognition that the two-tiered western understanding of the world stands in stark contrast with the world of Scripture. In other words, the West faces the challenge of examining biblical 'maps of the universe' that feature an interpretive landscape with ample room for both the seen and the unseen, the natural and the supernatural, and thus includes categories for which the West's own cultural map no longer has adequate space. The Akan scholars I have looked at challenge their western colleagues to question their two-tiered assumptions as they enter a comprehensive, global theological conversation with an African Christian scholarship come of age. In short, my research demonstrates how the single-tiered unitive perspective provides a helpful corrective to post-Enlightenment assumptions that inevitably lead to the fact-faith divide noted above.

## **2. CHAPTER SUMMARIES**

The single-tiered unitive perspective on reality runs as a connective thread throughout the chapters of this study, tying my research together. The cumulative effect describes a coherent, overarching narrative in which material and spiritual cause and effect are equally important for describing reality. In other words, the work of Pobee, Bediako, Dickson, and Oduyoye cannot be properly understood or appreciated without taking full account of the single-tiered understanding of reality out of which they all emerge.

In Chapter One, I introduced my argument that the single-tiered unitive perspective shared by the Akan scholars I would be considering is itself a useful hermeneutical tool for understanding their work. The single-tiered perspective produces an interpretive landscape whose horizons encompass the physical and metaphysical, the natural and the supernatural. Indeed, to adopt language that suggests these elements are separable or unequal risks misrepresenting the Akan context right from the start. My

research began with an intuition that this single-tiered unitive perspective on reality was important but without an understanding of why or how. Help came first from Kwesi Dickson, who describes Akan culture not merely as culture, but as ‘religio-culture’, making the point that to speak of Akan ‘culture’ without the supernatural component of ‘religio’ is misleading. Even as Akan religio-culture is the Akan people’s response to life as they experience it in a single-tiered landscape, what Andrew Walls describes as the Akan ‘map of the universe’ also emerges from the particular interpretive landscape produced by the single-tiered unitive perspective on reality. That map has room for the seen and the unseen, the physical and the metaphysical, and beings both natural and supernatural. Walls’s analysis reveals that the Akan map and the biblical map share features in common even if they are ‘coloured in’ differently.

Chapter Two took up the challenge presented by Kwesi Dickson and Ogbu Kalu, both of whom note the existence of the single-tiered unitive perspective (Kalu referring to it as ‘the eco-theology’ of the African ‘religious landscape’<sup>1</sup>), by examining the various ways Akan scholars have used this perspective. In this way, I demonstrated its importance to these scholars as they sought to write theologies that answered questions arising from their experience of the world. C. G. Baeta’s early study of the Spiritual churches showed how their success among the Akan was due to their ability to reimagine the Akan map of the universe using biblical categories, while Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu’s discussion of the Ghana Airways need for ‘healing’ demonstrated that the single-tiered perspective remains fundamental to any explanation of reality in modern Ghana. Asamoah-Gyadu’s work also called into serious question the western paradigm of inevitable secularization following close on the heels of modernity. In

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<sup>1</sup> Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 176.

other words, this chapter revealed that the single-tiered perspective is fundamental to both the past and present of Ghana.

Kwame Bediako wrote early in his career that identity must be considered a theological category, methodology, and hermeneutical key for writing African Christian theology. In Chapter Three, I examined this idea in some detail. In particular, I showed how Bediako's attention to Africa's 'ontological past' opened the way for a fruitful exploration of the single-tiered unitive perspective on reality, which he assumed to be an ontologically accurate description of the Akan world. By explicitly drawing the connection between Africa's ontological past and the single-tiered unitive perspective on reality, I showed how Bediako's 'identity as a theological category' is, in fact, a three pronged tool. This three-fold understanding of what Bediako means by identity further demonstrates the connection between the single-tiered perspective that shapes the Akan identity and the theological method and writings that emerge out of that identity. Further, we saw that Bediako is attentive to the ways in which language itself, to the extent that it reflects the single-tiered perspective, gives voice to Akan identity. I also noted, however, that reliance on the category of identity has certain inherent dangers, especially when identity in Christ is subsidiary to religio-cultural identity.

In Chapter Four, I used Bediako's insight regarding identity to show how the Akan single-tiered 'map of the universe' provides fruitful 'landing places', 'lines of congruence', 'bridges', and 'cultural channels' for understanding and articulating the gospel in Africa. I found, however, that a key distinction needs to be made in determining the usefulness of various landing places. By turning the focus from 'direct' continuity to the idea of 'analogical' continuity, I was able to show how scholars who previously had little to say to one another could begin to enter into fruitful dialogue. This is a significant development, given the lively, if at times contentious, debate that has raged for decades between scholars who deny even the possibility of continuity

between Africa's traditional religions and Christianity and others who suggest that those same traditional religions are a 'preparation for the gospel'.

The concept of 'analogical continuity' is itself derived from my articulation of the single-tiered perspective. Once established that this understanding of reality is shared by both the Akan and the biblical writers, we see that while the two 'maps' are in many ways similar, the surest way to move between them is by analogy. With this in mind, we can see that the debate over continuity actually revolves around a different question: is continuity direct? The answer I propose is that it normally is not. Is there, however, an underlying continuity, not between Africa's traditional religions and Christianity, but between the underlying single-tiered unitive perspective on reality that forms a foundation for both Africa's traditional religions and the biblical worldview? To that question, my answer is yes, so long as the continuity is understood to be primarily analogical. This, I suggest, is a key contribution of this dissertation, as it opens the door for conversations between scholars who, until now, were largely ships passing in the night.

For example, analogical continuity clarifies for us that Okot p'Bitek's criticism that western categories were imported and imposed on Africa may be true, but is beside the point. Had there been no analogical landing places within the African maps of the universe, Christianity could never have taken root. Continuity emerges from soil that could nurture such theological understandings because it was so similar to the biblical soil. Concurrently, Byang Kato's warning about the danger of syncretism is sharpened and in some ways encouraged as new landing places are identified and carefully evaluated, leading to the discovery that not all will lead to a better understanding of the gospel. Locating continuity between the African primal understanding of reality and the biblical picture of reality on an analogical level, however, could allow scholars like Okot p'Bitek, Byang Kato, and Kwame Bediako to now speak to each other. That said,

caution is still necessary in as much as analogical continuity functions better as a doorway than as a gatekeeper.

Chapters Five and Six are extended test cases looking at how Akan theologians have used their religio-culture to find ‘landing places’ for articulating an Akan Christology on the one hand and an Akan anthropology on the other. In Chapter Five, I showed how John Pobee and Kwame Bediako both use the Akan understanding of *Nana*/ancestor as it emerges from the single-tiered Akan religio-culture to establish a bridge between the biblical Jesus and the Akan desire for a mediator, intercessor, and saviour. That Jesus now fulfils in a final way the traditional intercessory/mediatorial role of the ancestors leaves Akan scholars with the question of what to do with the ancestors, whose ontological reality they do not question. Kwame Bediako’s suggestion that the ancestors continue to serve as preparers of the way and partners along the way describes the biblical picture. Charles Aye-Addo, a more recent Akan voice, challenges both Bediako and Pobee to consider ancestors along the trajectory of a more robust understanding of the communion of the saints, while Benhardt Quarshie pushes Bediako’s thought into new territory when he asserts that Jesus fulfils the desire of every Akan to be reckoned among the noble ancestors. In other words, the single-tiered perspective is clearly bearing fruit as it uses the *Nana*/ancestor category not only to say something significant about Jesus but also to recover a place for the ancestors—something theologians operating out of the two-tiered perspective of the West could not accomplish. Again, however, my research revealed the need for caution, demonstrating both the need for other tools to help identify and evaluate potential landing places and the need to qualify analogical continuity in order to produce an orthodox Christology.

In Chapter Six, we saw Mercy Oduyoye enter the conversation about what makes an Akan fully human in order to argue for the full equality of men and women before God. She argues that, for the Akan, the development of a fully human person requires

the equal participation of a woman to provide the *mogya*, and a man to provide the *ntoro*— life cannot exist without the contribution of both. I have argued that this line of reasoning is incomprehensible outside of a religio-culture emerging from the single-tiered unitive perspective on reality. Remove the single-tiered perspective from the equation, and Oduyoye's argument loses its nuance and force. Further, and just as importantly, Oduyoye's dual hermeneutic of experience and identity (with emphasis on the latter) demonstrates the critical role of the single-tiered perspective and the accompanying interpretive landscape in shaping her theological method. It is no accident that Oduyoye's liberation-feminism, emerging as it does from her Akan identity, did not always align well with her western counterparts. The difference between them, and the source of their conflict, is the single-tiered perspective. It is worth noting that, in my opinion, Oduyoye's work offers a larger common ground for discovering a way to full gender equality than her western colleagues are able to produce.

### **3. INSIGHTS AND AREAS FOR FURTHER STUDY EMERGING FROM USING THE SINGLE-TIERED UNDERSTANDING AS A HERMENEUTICAL KEY**

I began this work by quoting Andrew Walls, who commented that the only theology worth caring about today is theology emerging from Africa, Asia, and Latin America—the global South. My analysis has not tried to support or refute Walls's statement. I have attempted to answer a far less ambitious question: in what ways does the single-tiered unitive perspective on reality afford scholars a key with which to better understand African theology and so assess its place in the global Christian theological conversation? I will now suggest five areas where using the single-tiered unitive perspective as an interpretive key sheds light on African theologians' fruitful

contributions to the global theological conversation. These areas also represent areas ripe for further investigation.

### 3.1 The Role of Language that Reflects the Single-Tiered Unitive Perspective on Reality

Christians believe that the Bible in all its translations retains its status as the Word of God, albeit without replacing the original Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic texts. The authority of a translation always traces back to the fact that it translates those original texts. Consequently, the force of Kwame Bediako's argument for the value of particular translations, including his own Twi Bible, rests in the fact that God, through the incarnation and as he himself spoke a particular language, has deemed all languages equally valid for bearing his truth. What I argue here is that to the extent a language reflects the single-tiered unitive perspective on reality, it is able to reflect nuances and aspects of the gospel partially hidden in languages whose lexical frontiers have been determined by two-tiered, post-Enlightenment rationalism. For example, in translating Old Testament passages where the word *~yhil{a}* appears, *abosom* is at certain places a better rendering of that word because its lexical field includes spiritual beings at work in the biblical cosmos as they are in the Akan cosmos. In other words, to the extent that western culture is disenchanted, 'gods' may be a simple metaphor or a reference to mythical beings left-over from a superstitious era long gone. This process of disenchantment has not affected the word *abosom*. The West's two-tiered tacit understanding of reality allows for only a limited understanding of 'gods' and how they influence the world in which we live. This contrasts sharply with the robust understanding of the *abosom* within the interpretive landscape of the single-tiered perspective reflected in Twi. Using the lexical horizons of languages that reflect the single-tiered interpretive landscape to translate the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts



of Scripture will necessarily call into question the kind of exegetical work that Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu criticized in Rudolph Bultmann. Exegesis in languages like Twi challenges the fact-faith divide that emerges from the western two-tiered approach. In other words, the lexical horizons of languages that embrace the reality of the unitive perspective open new doors into understanding the Gospel. The careful study of Scripture from the perspective of various translations of the original language texts, while obviously demanding great care, holds out the possibility for an expanded, more holistic understanding of God's truth.

### **3.2 Paranormal Cognition—Understanding Understanding**

I discussed at some length in Chapter Two Kwame Gyekye's assertion that the Akan have a way of knowing largely lost to the West. The Akan use 'paranormal cognition', which includes knowledge gained through visions, dreams, and direct supernatural communication with ancestors or with God, alongside knowledge gained using the scientific method. Clearly, 'paranormal cognition' is dependent on the reality of the supernatural and the permeability of the natural and supernatural that allows for an interchange to take place between the two. Here the single-tiered structure of the Akan universe comes into analogical contact with the world of the Bible, where we also read about communication taking place within this permeable material/spiritual structure. The continuity is analogical rather than direct inasmuch as the biblical dreams themselves are not repeated. Rather, the fact that the biblical God uses dreams to communicate establishes a landing place for the possibility that God is still using dreams to guide or direct people today. At this point, Bediako's insistence on using the Bible as an arbiter is important, because although Gyekye himself did not set out a list of biblical criteria, one is certainly possible. For example, does a particular dream or vision further the work of God's Kingdom here on earth as described by the Old

Testament prophets and by Jesus? Does a particular dream contradict biblical teaching or encourage behaviour contrary to God's Law? Does a dream or vision lead to greater biblical holiness? However these tests are applied, it remains the case that the Akan, quite unlike westerners, generally expect God to communicate in dreams and visions.<sup>2</sup>

An interpretive landscape that includes real knowledge accessible through dreams, visions, and prophetic utterances again challenges the western inclination to find natural cause and effect explanations for paranormal manifestations of power.<sup>3</sup> What paranormal cognition cannot provide, however, is a hermeneutical key for distinguishing genuine acts of God from spiritual counterfeits. It does, however, re-introduce such sources of knowing into the global theological conversation. The unitive perspective of single-tiered ontology offers a direct challenge to western epistemology that this dissertation has not tried to expand on. Further research in this area would certainly appear to offer significant rewards.

### **3.3 Can a Biblical Theology Emerge from a Two-Tiered Structure?**

I suggested at the end of Chapter Four that it may no longer be possible to express a biblical theology except as it emerges from a single-tiered religio-culture. This suggestion warrants further discussion. The way the question is framed implies a yes or no answer of a type that is not actually possible. A more nuanced way of asking the question would be: what advantages or disadvantages arise in attempting to write a biblical theology when working from the tacit assumptions of either the single-tiered or two-tiered understanding of reality?

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<sup>2</sup> In a recent adult Sunday school class where I was speaking of these things, a young Zambian woman told the class that God speaks to her through dreams in which her grandmother appears and speaks. None of the other members of the class—all westerners— had experienced anything comparable.

<sup>3</sup> Evangelical scholars, who might otherwise be expected to defend miracles in Scripture, are not immune to this tendency. K. A. Kitchen, for example, gives a natural explanation for the first nine of the ten plagues on Egypt in *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1966), 157–58.

Based on my research, I conclude that the single-tiered unitive perspective offers great promise for articulating an understanding of the gospel that emerges from the analogical continuities present between the Bible and the Akan primal universe. The Bible may, of course, simply be wrong in its assertion that God speaks to people in visions and dreams or that God's power expresses itself in both natural and beyond-the-natural means. The Bible may be wrong in suggesting that God took human flesh upon himself in the person of the incarnate Jesus. The Bible may be wrong in picturing a universe inhabited by *Yahweh*, angels, archangels, the whole host of heavenly beings, and the company of heaven comprised of individuals who have died yet live. If we have discovered the truth that we live in a disenchanted world, then the work of Rudolph Bultmann is an act of kindness to the culture that can no longer pretend to carry a 'religio' component.<sup>4</sup> Bultmann has answered the questions his disenchanted culture asks in a way that makes sense. Yet even many who disagree with Bultmann in fundamental ways might benefit from the robust interpretive landscape emerging from the single-tiered unitive perspective. Certain sectors of evangelicalism in the West continue to mirror the attitudes of the evangelical colonial missionaries whose understanding of *religio* had, as Opoku Onyinah points out, become dim. My own training in the evangelical tradition of western Protestantism involved affirming the full trustworthiness of Scripture but still relied on theological tools dulled by the tacit, disenchanted bias of post-Enlightenment rationalism. It therefore seems to me that one reason for agreeing with Andrew Walls that African theology may be the only theology worth studying right now is the fact that Africa has the resources to help the West escape its tacit biases and read again (as if for the first time) the biblical narrative in its

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Rudolph Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, trans. Reginald Fuller (New York: Harper Row, 1961); Rudolph Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York: Scribners, 1955).

single-tiered fullness. If it is reasonable to propose that a hermeneutic emerging from the single-tiered interpretive landscape has an advantage in accessing the intent and meaning of the biblical text, then Walls' admitted exaggeration gains credence.

### **3.4 Bediako's Methodology and a Methodology of Observing the Tacit**

My analysis of Bediako's understanding and use of identity in three interlocking ways has potential for encouraging more voices from the global South to contribute insights that are uniquely accessible to them by virtue of their religio-cultural identities. As an analysis of the various Akan voices in our chapters on Christology and biblical anthropology demonstrated, numerous Akan scholars do indeed use identity as a theological category, method, and hermeneutical key. Of particular note is the conclusion that an analysis of Mercy Oduyoye's dual hermeneutic of identity and experience reveals her use of identity as the source of most of the weight of her argument.

Where Kwame Bediako saw Pentecost as the reversal of Babel, with the Holy Spirit now using the languages of every tongue, tribe, and ethnic group to express the truth of the Gospel, his focus on identity points to an even deeper undoing of Babel. People groups came to be divided not only by language but by the religio-cultures they developed in response to their understanding of reality. So, for Bediako, Pentecost opens up the possibility of converting those religio-cultures, and the identities growing out of them, to a mature Christian faith. This, in turn, presents a strong case for the global church to pay attention to theologies coming from every religio-culture: that nuances closed to one culture or identity are open in others, so it will take the whole church joining together in conversation and critical appreciation to arrive at anything like a penultimate understanding of the God who has revealed himself in his Word. In short, no judgment about the truth of the Christian faith can begin until the work of a

thoroughly global theological conversation has been engaged. Bediako's methodology challenges the two-tiered hegemony of western theologians by asking them to consider seriously their own identities according to the biblical criteria Bediako himself suggested for determining what from the old can be carried into the new.

Such a conversation, however, encourages a wider application of what I earlier described as 'observing the tacit'. As the world-wide church is composed of people from differing (religio-)cultures, allowing the tacit assumptions of one to collide with the tacit assumptions of others has the potential to produce the kind of 'iron sharpening iron' that theology needs.

### **3.5 Analogical Continuity**

The idea of analogical continuity, which I believe is one of the key contributions of this dissertation, grew directly out of my analysis of Akan scholars operating out of the single-tiered unitive understanding of reality, particularly as they sought to meet the challenge of scholars like Okot p'Bitek. I was struck by the fact that neither Bediako, as an Akan, nor Andrew Walls, as a western contributor to the conversation, were particularly successful in getting to the heart of p'Bitek's critique. My reading of the debate left me thinking that these scholars were ships passing in the night. Increasingly, however, I came to the conclusion that both their differences and their similarities came into focus when I used the single-tiered perspective as a kind of red dye applied to a specimen slide. Or, to return to the previous image, the single-tiered perspective and the resulting interpretive landscape served as a port of call where their respective ships could stop and meet.

The single-tiered perception of the structure of reality offers a starting point for both Bediako and p'Bitek by granting that the significant differences between Africa's traditional religions and Christianity are real. African traditionalists are not required to

use the historic language of Christendom (rooted in Greco-Roman categories) to describe their gods and so do violence to their particular apprehension of their Supreme God and the other inhabitants of their cosmologies. Continuity that is analogical—that makes use of landing places that exist due to a common single-tiered unitive perspective on reality—invites a conversation that allows for authentic dialogue between equals. P'Bitek is free to reject the god revealed in Scripture; what he is no longer free to do is reject the fact that the god he chooses to accept or reject in traditional African religions emerges from the same understanding of reality as the god revealed in the Bible. Darrel Whiteman's analysis of the Melanesian context clearly demonstrates that it is the recipients of new religious ideas who decide what to accept and what to reject. In other words, the African follower of any particular traditional religion decides what to make of Christianity, a fact that p'Bitek does not appear to have fully appreciated. Again, analogical continuity does not predict an outcome; it simply provides a tool for theological conversation. As already noted, analogical continuity is a doorway, not a gatekeeper.

#### **4. AFRICAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGIES AND THE FACT-FAITH DIVIDE IN THE WEST**

I turn now to my final question: in what ways might the single-tiered unitive perspective contribute to finding a way through the fact-faith divide that is evident in much of the West? I believe that the single-tiered unitive perspective, along with the interpretive landscape it produces, offers to the West a new place to stand and look at the world. In this sense, the unitive perspective becomes a dialogue partner while rejecting the kind of neo-colonial imposition of values noted by Mercy Oduyoye and Emmanuel Martey. When Andrew Walls points out that African theologians have always worked within a

context that takes the ontological reality of both the natural and supernatural seriously, he pinpoints exactly where this ‘new place to stand’ is located.

If my analysis is correct, and the fact-faith divide that Newbigin observed in the West is the result of privileging material cause and effect explanations of reality virtually to the exclusion of any explanation emerging from the *religio*, then Akan scholars’ insistence on their right to assert an equally vigorous role for the *religio* directly challenges the West. Further, if Bediako’s suggestion that the West has never actually escaped its own primal past (and in fact continues to intuit the *religio* as present and operative) is true, then the single-tiered perspective offers the West a new approach. The unitive perspective offers a tool for investigating spiritual causal factors on an equal footing with material cause and effect.

In short, the single-tiered perspective challenges westerners to consider the possibility that their explanatory paradigm is too small because it tends to consider only that which can be measured using the tools of the scientific method to be real. At the same time, the single-tiered perspective opens up new roads of investigation that are by definition closed to the two-tiered narrative, roads already well-travelled on the Akan primal maps of the universe. These maps, as I have shown, have proved remarkably adept at tracing new theological paths for the church.

## 5. SOME FURTHER QUESTIONS

The single-tiered unitive perspective on reality leaves several important questions unanswered. First, will this understanding of reality ultimately resist the pressures of modernity? Two factors lead me to believe it will. First, African scholars are doubtful that the West’s two-tiered approach represents an improvement over their single-tiered perspective. Second, the western turn toward post-modernism, arguably a humbler intellectual perspective than modernity because it de-privileges formerly dominant

ideologies, means that the West is no longer as confident in its own rightness as it once was—a fact noted by African scholars. Bediako, for one, thinks that in post-modernism he is seeing some primal elements returning and gaining new credibility in the West in forms such as a renewed interest in the occult, and quests for spiritual experience, whether with or without God. According to Bediako, this points to the fact

that a primal world-view, suppressed rather than encountered, redeemed and integrated, rises to haunt the future. In this connection, the viability of a Christian consciousness which retains its sense of the spiritual world of primal religions, as well as the theological encounter between the primal world-view and Christian faith that is evident in African Christianity, constitutes an implicit challenge to the notion that humanity can be fully defined in exclusively post-Enlightenment terms.<sup>5</sup>

I will return to this point in just a moment.

A second question addresses the role the single-tiered unitive perspective will play in articulating a fully developed African theology that covers the various topics found in a typical western systematic theology. Again, my inclination is to say that such a theology will be written, but that it will look more like a many-faceted diamond than the propositional formulation so favoured in the West. Or, to change the image once more, I believe we can look forward to that exciting day when African scholars begin to pull together the various threads of their work into a new and beautiful piece of *kente* cloth for all the world to see.

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<sup>5</sup> Bediako, 'Understanding African Christian Theology', 18.



## Epilogue

### Part 1: Echoes in the West

The following section is not, strictly speaking, a part of my dissertation. However, because Kwame Bediako has argued for a primal imagination that cannot escape thinking about the world as a permeable whole made up of the seen and unseen, the material and the spiritual, I believe it is important to ask whether there is in fact evidence of this intuition anywhere in the West. Returning to Bediako's prescient phrase, which asks whether the West's own primal past will rise 'to haunt [its] future',<sup>1</sup> I would suggest that the best place to find evidence of the West's primal past—far better than phenomena such as Ouija boards, horoscopes, a fascination with the occult, faddish vampires, or even with the apparent opening afforded by post-modernism—is in its literature. The important works of J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, William Kennedy, Robertson Davies, and Flannery O'Connor come immediately to mind.<sup>2</sup> However, I find in the novels of Sigrid Undset (1882–1949), particularly her *Kristin Lavransdatter*, the most intriguing use of the West's primal past in modern literature.

Undset was the daughter of a Norwegian archaeologist who earned his doctorate in 1881 with a thesis on 'The Beginnings of the Iron Age in Northern Europe'.<sup>3</sup> In addition he was an expert in Norse pre-history—the primal world to which Bediako referred. According to Norwegian journalist Gidske Anderson, Undset experienced a

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<sup>1</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience* (Oxford: Regnum, 2000), 59–60. This passage is quoted in full in Chapter Two.

<sup>2</sup> Tolkien (1892–1973) and Lewis (1898–1963), both British, rank among the most enduringly popular and influential English-language novelists of the twentieth century. Kennedy (b. 1928), a Pulitzer Prize-winning author and journalist, and O'Connor (1925–1964), best known for her short stories, are both American. Davies (1913–1995) was a well-known Canadian author, playwright, and critic.

<sup>3</sup> These details are taken from *Nobel Lectures, Literature 1901–1967*, ed. Horst Frenz (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1969), quoted in 'Sigrid Undset – Biographical', Nobelprize.org, accessed July 18, 2016, [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1928/undset-bio.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1928/undset-bio.html).

series of events—including her father's death, her education in a progressive school, her marriage and subsequent divorce, her raising of six children (two of whom were mentally challenged), and her experience of the First World War that led her to leave agnosticism for the Christian faith as a convert to Roman Catholicism.

During those difficult years she had experienced a crisis of faith, almost imperceptible at first, then increasingly strong. The crisis led her from clear agnostic skepticism, by way of painful uneasiness about the ethical decline of the time, towards Christianity. She had grown up in a tolerant, freethinking home, and had herself been a sceptical free-thinker, though without the blind faith of the time in science and materialism being the be-all and end-all.<sup>4</sup>

Of her formal education, which ended when she was sixteen due to a lack of funds after her father's death when she was just eleven,<sup>5</sup> Undset wrote,

I was sent to a school run by Mrs. Ragna Nielsen because my father was already aware that his days were numbered, and he was anxious for me to acquire a good education and follow in his footsteps. Mrs. Nielsen's school was co-educational and heavily committed to progressive educational ideas. It played an important role in shaping my character, inspiring me with an indelible distrust of enthusiasm for such beliefs! It was not that I disliked Mrs. Nielsen or suspected her of not being so noble-minded or attached to her principles as she appeared to be. No, it was those very principles which filled me with boundless scepticism; I knew not why either then or for a long time afterwards.<sup>6</sup>

Where did that scepticism originate? The answer appears to come from the fact that before leaving school at sixteen Undset had already learned a great deal from her father about Norse legends, myths, and folktales. Later in life, she recounted that her exposure to the Old Norse sagas she read as a child marked 'the most important turning point in my life'.<sup>7</sup> They introduced her to a living world—a world that provided her

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<sup>4</sup> See Gidske Anderson, 'Sigrid Undset', Great Norwegians, accessed July 18, 2016, <http://www.mnc.net/norway/SigUnd.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> Undset's mother sent her to secretarial school so that she could get a job. She worked as a secretary for close to ten years, during which time she began to write in the evenings and weekends.

<sup>6</sup> See 'Sigrid Undset – Biographical'.

<sup>7</sup> Accessed on July 16, 2016 from: [https://play.google.com/store/books/details?id=380UOUSjYFQC&source=productsearch&utm\\_source=H](https://play.google.com/store/books/details?id=380UOUSjYFQC&source=productsearch&utm_source=H)

with the best possible canvas for writing about life in all its depth. Undset placed many of her works in contemporary settings, but the two works for which she was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature—*Kristin Lavransdatter* (three volumes) and *The Master of Hestviken* (four volumes)—were both set in fourteenth-century Norway.<sup>8</sup> Undset began work on *Kristin Lavransdatter* in 1921 after spending many years immersing herself in Norse manuscripts and medieval texts along with medieval churches and monasteries.<sup>9</sup> Her biographer tells us that by 1921 she was an authority on this period in Norwegian history, and her descriptions of fourteenth-century Norway have stood up to scholarly scrutiny as archaeologists and historians have continued to examine the time period.<sup>10</sup>

Over the Christmas and New Year's break of 2013–14 I read *Kristin Lavransdatter* for the first time, and was struck by the extraordinary similarities between the primal world depicted in Undset's novel and the primal world described by Bediako.<sup>11</sup> As I read Undset, I was reminded of Andrew Walls's comment to the effect that if you want to know what the world of the second-century church was like, go to Africa today.<sup>12</sup> The same, it seemed to me, could be said about Norway in the fourteenth-century, a time in which the unconverted peoples of northern Norway shared a primal understanding of the world with the newly-converted Norwegian Christians to their south. In Undset's story of Kristen, daughter of Lavran, I found a three-

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<sup>8</sup> According to the Nobel Foundation, Undset was recognized 'principally for her powerful descriptions of Northern life during the Middle Ages'. See 'The Nobel Prize in Literature 1928', Nobelprize.org, accessed July 18, 2016, [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1928/](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1928/).

<sup>9</sup> Anderson, 'Sigrid Undset'.

<sup>10</sup> Anderson, 'Sigrid Undset'.

<sup>11</sup> Sigrid Undset, *Kristin Lavransdatter*. Translated by Tiina Nunnally. (New York: Penguin Classics, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in The Transmission of the Faith* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996) xv.

dimensional world where human freedom was worked out in the context of God's transcendent immanence, and where both the natural and the supernatural—the material and the spiritual—were equally necessary to explain life. It was the same type of world that I found in African Christian theology. While Kristin ends her life in a convent, her decision represents not an escape from the real world but a choice to enter more deeply into the reality of the world she had never left.

While the full three-part novel cannot be summarized here, for our purposes the most significant thing about *Kristin Lavransdatter* is that Undset—a twentieth-century western author—felt compelled to turn to a single-tiered ontological landscape to portray life in all its complexity, nuance, tragedy, glory, and meaning. The two-tiered world of modernity, which so privileged the material, simply failed to provide her with a world that was detailed enough to tell the story of life as she understood it. The world of Undset, discovered more than created, is the same primal world that Bediako suggested is integral to the memory of the West, no matter how hard it tried to 'suppress' that memory, and it is in literary works like *Kristin Lavransdatter* that this world is encountered and engaged. It is here that the primal worlds of Africa and the West converge, and here that landing places for dialogue emerge. The words are different but the heart language is the same.

## Part 2: Sacramental Sensitivities in the West

In this section I want to consider briefly the Dutch Roman Catholic theologian Edward Schillebeeckx's, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*.<sup>13</sup> Sigrid Undset's work is one of literary genius; Schillebeeckx's is one of theological imagination which invites us into that same single-tiered world where we can begin to both understand and experience the sacraments as places of real encounter with the living God. What they have in common is that both emerge from a sacramental universe. It might go without saying but should be noted that both Undset and Schillebeeckx come out of the Roman Catholic tradition, a tradition that, unlike so much of Protestantism, did not buy into the (what I consider) excesses of post-Enlightenment rationalism.

Edward Schillebeeckx's description of the sacraments, and particularly of the Eucharist, demonstrates the fruitfulness of an approach that takes full advantage of the robust interaction of both the seen and the unseen, of the natural and supernatural cohering yet distinguishable.

At the outset of his book, Schillebeeckx uses the term 'primordial sacrament' to refer to Jesus and will, later, use the same phrase to designate Christ's Body, the Church. As in Bediako's writing, the term directs our attention to that which is anterior to what would later emerge in the sacraments – places where God meets his people in saving power. Schillebeeckx is insistent on the historicity of God's encounters with his creation. The unseen meets the seen and takes on recognizable form. These are encounters that take place in the dust and sweat, the blood and tears, the roads and homes of real people. He writes,

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<sup>13</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, London, T & T Clark, 1963. Electronic version, accessed through the Bodleian Library, February 17, 2018.

... God, through his revelation personally intervenes on behalf of mankind, not merely as the Creator who guides history in creative transcendence, but as someone who himself takes part in the unfolding play of history and comes to take his place at our side.<sup>14</sup>

Grace itself takes on physical form in history, most particularly, as Schillebeeckx will soon point out, in Christ's Incarnation. The sacraments are, for Schillebeeckx, those places where the natural and supernatural become palpably real to our experience of life.

Because grace is a personal encounter with God, it "makes history" and precisely for this reason it is also "sacramental". For every supernatural reality which is realized historically in our lives is sacramental. That which God intends for man, he brings about in the course of human history, and this he does in such a fashion that his saving acts become visible precisely as divine. God's saving activity "makes history" by revealing itself, and it reveals itself by becoming history.<sup>15</sup>

Salvation comes through a personal encounter with the incarnate Son of God – where incarnation is inclusive of Jesus' birth, life, atoning work on the cross, resurrection, and ascension.<sup>16</sup> However, a problem arises for those living after Jesus' ascension: how can a person have a personal encounter with Jesus who is now at the right hand of the Father? The answer is through the sacraments offered by the Body of Christ here and now. The Church does not offer to its people a 2000 year old Jesus but the living Jesus present with us by his Spirit. He writes,

Each sacrament is the personal saving act of the risen Christ himself, but realized in the visible form of an official act of the Church. ... To receive the sacraments of the Church in faith is therefore the same thing as to encounter Christ himself.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, 4.

<sup>15</sup> Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, 4.

<sup>16</sup> 'The Incarnation is the whole life of Christ, from his conception in the womb, through all his further life of action, completed finally in his death, resurrection and being established as Lord and Sender of the Paraclete; it is prolonged everlastingly in his uninterrupted sending of the Holy Spirit.' Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, 28-29.

<sup>17</sup> Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, 63-64.

Schillebeeckx's argument is complex and I do not have the time or space to outline all of his thinking here. However, the point I do want to make is that as with Sigrid Undset, Edward Schillebeeckx required the understanding of reality which I have described using the term 'single-tiered unitive perspective' to describe this mystery of the sacraments in something approaching their fullness as he saw them. So, in his 'Conclusion' Schillebeeckx describes the personal encounter people experience in the Eucharist this way:

All the foregoing come together in the sacrifice of the Mass and, at this point of contact, the final consummation is reached in the glory of the Lord himself. "You have shown yourself to me, Christ, face to face", says St. Ambrose: "it is in your sacraments that I meet you."<sup>18</sup>

At the Mass Schillebeeckx sees himself as being like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus who, when they met Christ personally, were aware that they were in the presence of more than an ordinary man. 'We are conscious,' he writes, 'of his concealed presence near us, for when he addresses us through his sacraments, our hearts, intent upon his words, burn with longing and we turn at once to Christian action in the words of the "whilst he spoke in the way?"'<sup>19</sup>

In Schillebeeckx I would argue that we see a theology of the sacraments which embraces with heart, mind and soul the seen and unseen living universe of God's creation. To consider Schillebeeckx and Undset together suggests perhaps that the world Bediako saw is neither so lost nor forgotten in the West as he thought. If that is true then in the continuing global conversation of the Church of Jesus Christ the 'remembering' of that single-tiered world that Bediako thought the West had forgotten

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<sup>18</sup> St. Ambrose, *Apologia Prophetiae David*, 12, 58 (PL, 14, col. 875).

<sup>19</sup> Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, 222. Here he is referencing Luke 24.32.

may not be as difficult to accomplish as he imagined. After all, some of the West's best thinkers appear never to have left that world either.



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